

# Hard to reach? Young people's experiences and understandings of the post-16 transition

Submitted by Darren Andrew Moore to the University of Exeter  
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## **Abstract**

This thesis is concerned with the experiences and understandings of young people as they move from their final two years of compulsory education into a range of post-16 destinations including Further Education, work, apprenticeships and unemployment. The participants were all identified as being 'hard to reach' by school practitioners. The research responds to a need to deepen understanding of such young people ahead of the age of participation in education and training in England being raised to 18 in 2015.

The research was conducted in the South West of England. The empirical research was undertaken between January 2008 and April 2010 and comprised semi-structured interviews with 51 young people who were interviewed between one and three times during that period. The data presented in this thesis is focused on 11 of those young people who were each interviewed on three occasions.

The findings suggest similarities between the post-16 transition experiences of the young people participating here and those of young people in this age range, not identified as 'hard to reach'. Notwithstanding these parallels, the research revealed that young peoples' post-16 transitions and the aspirations they hold are often more nuanced than has been theorised in previous research. The findings raise questions about the implications of labelling young people, and 14-19 policy predicated upon assumptions regarding those who do not participate post-16.

In conclusion it is suggested that at a time of continued economic uncertainty and UK youth unemployment approaching one million<sup>1</sup>, young people need more flexibility in the school and post-16 experiences that are available and actively encouraged, rather than increased levels of constraint.

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# Chapter one

## 1. Introduction

This thesis explores the experiences and understandings of young people identified as 'hard to reach' during their final years of compulsory schooling. The 'hard to reach' young people who participated were those that school practitioners identified as not meeting their 'potential' and those that they considered unlikely to make a 'positive' post-16 transition into education, employment or training<sup>1</sup>. Participants were interviewed on three occasions over a three year period. The research sought to understand their longitudinal transitions as they moved into and through their post-16 destinations.

The formal post-16 transition refers to the end of Key Stage 4 education in the UK (Dewson et al, 2004), which currently marks the end of compulsory schooling and the first point at which young people may leave education. The transition point itself has been recognised as the time between leaving school and commencing a post-16 destination, which is typically the following September for those continuing in education. However, the definition of 'transition' is contested (Stokes & Wyn, 2007); it is more complex than just transfer (Ecclestone, 2007). Therefore this research assumes that the transition refers not just to short-term changes in structure, but also to a far wider range of potential changes which may take place over an extended period. Accordingly, it is assumed, the post-16 transition is experienced by young people before the end of school as they contemplate their future and for some time after this, while they begin to experience the diversity of post-16 life (Walker, 2007). The post-16 transition is thus an important period for young people since it marks a perceived turning point (Strauss, 1962) and shift as they move into employment/unemployment or post-compulsory education and training.

This research is particularly important at the time of writing (early 2011), because it represents a final opportunity to explore the experiences of young

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<sup>1</sup> The participants' 'hard to reach' label was therefore subjective, applied by practitioners. The definition of hard to reach used in this study is considered in chapter 2. Young people with statements of Special Educational Needs were not included in the research, neither were those young people who were off school roll or long-term absentees.

people considered 'hard to reach' in England before the age of compulsory participation in education and training is raised to 18 in 2015 (Education and Skills Act, 2008). Moreover, this study presented an opportunity to capture young people's transitions during a time of political and economic uncertainty in the wake of the UK recession of 2008-2009, and austerity measures under the incoming Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010. Notwithstanding the wider contemporary context, the focus of the research is centred upon understanding and interpreting the experiences of the young people who participated, questioning often held assumptions around choice, identity, labelling, transitions and other theoretical constructs.

In this introductory chapter I outline the context that led me to the particular research problem. The chapter is split into four sections; in the first section I consider the personal journey that led me to this study, in particular the previous study which sensitised me to the research problem. I then present a rationale, which argues the relevance and importance of this study. The longer section which provides the background to the research elaborates on the key contextual issues which situate the research. Finally in this chapter I outline the structure of the remainder of this thesis.

## **1.1 Personal Context**

In this section I concentrate on the personal beliefs and experiences that led me to this research. I discuss research I completed ahead of my doctorate that sensitised me to the research problem addressed in the current study. In so doing I point to the personal journey that I experienced ahead of this research. I moved from prior preconceptions regarding the benefit of further education (FE) for all young people and an acceptance of 14-19 policy reform, to a critical questioning of assumptions regarding positive progression and reasons for non-participation.

In 2005 I was a psychology graduate with a keen interest in educational psychology. However, following my final year dissertation I dismissed the idea of progressing my final year work towards a PhD in psychology. I began work

as a researcher at an FE college and within a year was also teaching psychology. My employer supported me in undertaking a Masters in Educational Research at the University of Exeter. My goal in doing so was to broaden the narrow and restrictive concerns of research in FE. My Masters' dissertation study allowed me an opportunity for research that held both a personal interest and wider relevance. It was only at the end of that year that I sought to continue with my studies to doctoral level.

My Masters dissertation study of post-16 transitions was relevant to my work role and allowed me to develop contacts with local schools. Through my work and my studies, I had gained a deep understanding of the FE sector and educational policy. In particular I began to gain an appreciation of how critical a life event the post-16 transition was for young people and how this was reflected in UK government 14-19 reforms affecting schools and FE colleges. My Masters dissertation study was an exploration of young people's experiences, specifically researching, using a questionnaire, the anticipation of the post-16 transition and the decision-making of Year 11 pupils<sup>1</sup> towards the end of their compulsory schooling. The research also included ten interviews with a diverse range of questionnaire respondents before and after their post-16 transition in order to explore further the questionnaire findings.

Findings from the questionnaire survey showed that the post-16 transition is often considered a significant change by pupils and, in keeping with previous research (e.g. Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2000), uncovered issues concerning changing social networks, career plans, experience of school and change in identity. My questionnaire results suggested that pupils tended to be looking forward to leaving school. However, it also suggested that my participants seemed under-prepared to commence their post-16 destination. The more pupils looked forward to their transition, the more they knew what to expect from their choice. Males in the cohort were more positive about their post-16 transition and seemed to be better prepared than females. Participants whose destination was different from school life (i.e. vocational destinations) were most looking forward to their transition. Pupils received support from their school and

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<sup>1</sup> In this thesis I typically refer to young people at school as pupils and young people in Further Education at school or college as students.

their destination and also valued the support of parents and other important people. No differences were found in support received according to different destinations (Moore, 2007).

While my questionnaire results shared similarities with findings reported from interpretative studies (e.g. Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997; Bloomer, 2001; Lawy, 2002a; Lawy & Bloomer, 2003), I wanted to investigate further the results of this quantitative analysis. Taken alone the questionnaire research did not adequately capture the anticipation of transition for the 800 young people who responded. Therefore interviews were used to elaborate on these initial findings to gain a richer account of the experience of young people both ahead of the end of compulsory schooling and later after the post-16 transition had taken place.

For this more in-depth investigation, diversity in experience was deliberately sampled when selecting interviewees so that the range of issues the questionnaire analysis revealed could be better understood. Findings from these interviews suggested that those young people who had experienced difficulties at school experienced a more pivotal transition in their lives, compared to their peers who were surer of their transition from school to further education. The experiences of these 'hard to reach' learners at the end of compulsory schooling was often unpredictable and uncertain. Therefore such young people warranted more in-depth study in an extended research project which would explore the post-16 transition experience of this type of young person, without necessarily focusing on this time as a purely educational transition – as had been the case in the MSc study.

Although I initially expected the MSc research to be a stand-alone project, the clear direction for further research and the opportunity to apply for an ESRC studentship led me to reconsider my options. My previous study had sensitised me to the methods most suited to the research. Questionnaires were an appropriate method for broadly capturing the anticipation of 800 Year 11 pupils, however, the method only allowed a broad-brush picture of how an individual anticipates the end of school. Whilst my quantitative analysis provided some useful insights by considering differences amongst participants, however, it was

the interviews that allowed for elaboration on the survey responses and gave a picture of the individual experience over the transition period in rich qualitative detail. As such this indicated that interviews would be the more conducive method to studying young people considered 'hard to reach' in the current study. Furthermore questionnaire responses in the sensitising study ranged in detail, with many incomplete responses, and it has been shown elsewhere that this method is not appropriate for use with more disaffected students (Curtis et al, 2004).

The sensitising study I conducted as part of my MSc had given me a taste of academic research, but also led me to consider what makes young people 'hard to reach', how they might be reached and why there is a lack of fit between some young people and their schooling. These concerns were relevant to my work in FE, but I felt distanced from the actual experience of students and conducting quantitative research had not allowed the closer, fuller understanding of these young people I sought. Therefore in this current study I explored what it meant to be identified as 'hard to reach', but also, more critically, this research took a holistic stance, interpreting how these young people experienced their lives towards the end of compulsory schooling and beyond.

This focus meant that I had to reconsider my own theoretical perspective. In prior psychological research I had taken a more realist approach, attempting to objectively test specific variables, such as young people's attitudes. Evaluating that the sensitising study was limited in terms of its focus upon learning and an educational transition, I knew that the current study must be complimented by an adoption of a constructionist framework (Crotty, 1998). The interest in young people's experiences and in particular their interests and meanings here compliments the constructionist view of meaning only existing through people's engagement with an often changing world (Pring, 2000).

Constructionism is the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent on human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Crotty, 1998, p.42).

Crotty's words highlight the essentially social nature of the more typical constructionist viewpoint. Constructionism can range from a weaker, more realist stance in which a concept of reality must exist outside of discourse, a view that has been associated with Pierce amongst others (Horn, 2008), to a more deconstructionist view whereby we cannot make claims about a real world that exists beyond our descriptions of it (Burr, 2003). Constructionism can be distinguished from subjectivism in terms of the phenomenological concept of intentionality. I take the view that humans are conscious of their actions and constructions; they are beings-in-the-world and as such there is intersubjectivity as humans construct meanings together upon the world in which they live (Crotty, 1998).

Constructionism and constructivism are often used inter-changeably (e.g. Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). Constructivism highlights that despite the social nature of meaning generation, individuals have varied perspectives. Constructivism acknowledges the unique experience of individuals and that each person's world view is equally valid. I see my own theoretical framework as fitting the above constructionist and constructivist concerns. I assume individuals construct meaning which is often social in origin, yet individuals hold different meanings and understandings to others within various social group. As such one can hold both a constructivist and constructionist epistemology (Crotty, 1998).

That said I share Crotty's (1998) view that one does not start a research journey with a rigid, personal theoretical framework in mind, but rather that I had to be perceptive to the unique needs of the current study. As such ontological concerns arise out of research design as much as they constrain the direction of research. The focus on young people's experiences and understandings accepts their constructions and the comparison across individuals shows constructivist thinking as opposed to focus upon a particular group of young people as is seen in research elsewhere (e.g. Bates & Riseborough, 1993). These epistemological concerns are shaped by the research problem outlined in the rest of this chapter.

## 1.2 Rationale and contribution

Thus far in this chapter I have detailed the personal background and experiences that have led me to this study. In particular I detailed the sensitising study that highlighted the research problem. In this section I highlight the reasons why this particular study was undertaken and the importance it holds. I then suggest the contribution this study intended to make. The implication of these contributions will be reconsidered in chapter six.

16-year-old school leavers in 2011 are not yet legally obliged to stay in education or training; instead, they may seek many diverse destinations upon leaving school. Motivations and key influences for post-16 destinations also differ, yet the sensitising study and previous literature considered in chapter two shows that even the transition from Year 11 to Sixth Form at the same school is considered a significant change by Year 11 pupils ahead of this transition (Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2000). The current research recognises that the post-16 transition is an important time in the lives of young people (cf. Lawy 2002a); but this study problematises the naïve assumption that young people choose their post-16 destination.

While there does exist a strong body of non-academic literature on the post-16 transition (e.g. Reisenberger & Crowther, 1997; Millar, 2004; Smith, Lilley, Marris & Krechowicka, 2005), such research tends to be evaluative, specific and focused on only one aspect of this potentially multi-faceted life change. Academic educational research focussed on the post-16 transition is less frequently found and the most significant research projects tend to be dated (e.g. Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997; Ball, Maguire & Macrae, 2000). More recent literature tends to report smaller scale research in academic journals (e.g. Lawy, 2003; Maguire & Rennison, 2005; Shildrick & Macdonald, 2007), or is government driven research which has been used to support various aspects of 14-19 policy, in particular, the raising of the participation age (e.g. Feinstein & Sabates, 2006; McIntosh & Houghton, 2005; Spielhofer et al, 2009).

Understanding young people's post-16 transitions has become more pertinent given the UK Labour government's (1997-2008) bill to raise the participation

age (RPA). The legislation was granted Royal Assent in 2008, such that in 2013 17-year-olds will need to be engaged in education or recognised training. Two years later in 2015 the participation age will be raised to 18. Therefore participants here represent one of the final cohorts of young people who will be able to move into employment without training or unemployment after they have finished school.

There is a limited time before RPA for research to potentially challenge assumptions made by the UK Government about non-participation and the needs of young people who do not engage post-16. It is these 'hard to reach' young people who will perhaps be most affected by the Act. This research is therefore highly relevant and holds practical value, especially as many envisage that total participation, or even the 95% participation cited in legislation, is not possible (e.g. Fletcher, Corney & Stanton, 2007). Fundamentally, this research has enabled a final exploration of why some young people move out of education or training between the ages of 16-18 and their experiences of this. Findings therefore raise implications around the reasons for participating or not.

The focus of the current research were young people identified by school practitioners as 'hard to reach'. Consideration of the use of this term is given in chapter two. Classic studies of the post-16 transition (e.g. Ball, et al., 2000; Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1997) have focussed on young people in general. This study can therefore cast light on whether the experiences of young people identified as 'hard to reach' at school are in keeping with the experience of their peers in wider cohorts of young people at the post-16 transition.

This thesis also adds to the understanding of 'hard to reach' youth and other similar subgroups, by considering these young people's lives longitudinally across the post-16 transition. Previous research in this field has invariably focused on particular experiences or characteristics of this group, for instance unemployment (e.g. Behrens & Evans, 2002), drug use (e.g. Shildrick, 2002), mentoring (e.g. Reid, 2002), reengagement and inclusion (e.g. Attwood, Croll & Hamilton 2003) and motivation (e.g. Yair, 2000). Rarely is such research longitudinal.

This is therefore an under-researched area; few peer reviewed articles have specifically researched the post-16 transition and no recent longitudinal research has focused on 'hard to reach' young people across their post-16 transition. This research provides a unique exposé into the lives of young people who were considered 'hard to reach' at school. While this research fills a gap in the educational research field, it may be argued that the 'hard to reach' stories revealed in the analysis chapters are not typically heard at all (Evangelou & Boag-Munroe, 2009).

Given the context of RPA and improved social justice as part of 14-19 reforms, there is a need to address 'hard to reach' young people and consider both the relevance of 14-19 education and training on offer to them and the potential conflict between their dispositions and ongoing socio-political change. The research findings reported here will have implications for both practitioners and policy-makers. School practitioners may learn from the stories of young people presented here, as they invariably continue to work with other pupils they would consider 'hard to reach'. In terms of policy implications, this research assessed whether the needs of this group of young people are being met, both educationally and beyond.

The research investigates decisions around the post-16 destination for these young people, but also captured the issues beyond education that are at play over this period in young people's everyday lives. Raffo (2003) emphasises the need for a much more detailed analysis of wider socio-cultural factors that impact on young people in transition. Anticipating that the interests and experiences of the young people participating would reach far beyond education, the current research appreciated how various networks of influence affect young people. This allowed for a theoretical understanding of young people who experience the post-16 transition, whilst capturing far more than the educational journey itself. Consequently, while the research takes as its fulcrum the post-16 transition as an educational turning point that affects all the participants, the research takes stock of all the important issues found within the young people's social milieu, including factors that may not affect the post-16 transition, but which are of importance to the young people around this time. To know the distracters and priorities outside of education can have implications for

practice, but can also assist understanding of why these young people were identified as hard to reach learners.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this thesis will be to an empirical understanding of youth in 2011. In the literature, youth is often perceived as a problem (Bottrell, 2007), while 'hard to reach' youth have been assumed to be deviant (Muncie, 2004). However, this research has not sought to test these or any other assumptions. Instead the interpretation is grounded in the voice of 'hard to reach' young people, which has often been neglected in the literature (Curtis et al, 2004). Topical youth issues such as antisocial behaviour, violence, drinking and drugs have been explored where they were raised by the young people themselves. As such the research remains contemporary, but reconceptualises the pervading views of youth as a problem, focussing on a problematic subgroup of youth (Milbourne, 2002), but seeking understanding rather than a solution.

### **1.3 Background to the research**

In this section I consider the socio-political context which positions the current research. In the final chapter of the thesis I return to this discussion to consider the implications of the findings of this study in light of current policy. The post-16 transitions of the young people studied were situated in a challenging and turbulent time politically and economically. The overarching policy message that young people need to participate and achieve post-16 in order to tackle both the UK's skills deficit and social exclusion is explored below. The discussion reveals that issues around skills, social exclusion, 14-19 education and participation are closely interlinked. However, I show that policy rhetoric often fails to challenge its broad brush assumptions (Wolf, Jenkins & Vignoles, 2006) and does not recognise that hard to reach groups are heterogeneous. All of these factors are central to understanding the post-16 transition and young people's experiences across the 14-19 phase.

### 1.3.1 Globalisation and Skills

Globalisation is an ambiguous term often conceived in the same way as internationalisation, referring to increases of interaction and interdependence between countries (Scholte, 2000). The definition of globalisation as deterritorialisation, a process which has seen increased integration of the world in terms of communication, economy and trade, and allied technological change, has a far reaching impact on individual countries' education and skills agenda (Papastergiadis, 2000).

New technology and new knowledge are considered to be essential for UK economic success in a post-fordist era (Thompson & Smith, 2009), particularly given that the workforce can no longer rely on low-skilled manufacturing jobs, as these jobs migrate to low-cost economies in Eastern Europe and Asia (OECD, 2007a). It had been argued that the UK is well placed to become a 'magnet' economy, supplying the global economy with high skilled, high waged workers (Brown, Lauder & Ashton, 2008). Therefore much emphasis has been placed on the need for the UK to enter the global skills race:

The challenge this century is a global skills race and that is why we need to push ahead faster with our reforms to extend education opportunities for all ... Globalisation dictates that the nations that succeed will be those that bring out the best in people and their potential (Prime Minister Gordon Brown, 2008).

Lord Leitch highlighted skills as one of the most important drivers of a successful economy and a just society as part of the Leitch Review (Leitch, 2006). The review considered the UK's long-term skill needs, recommending the UK's optimal skills mix for 2020 in order to maximise economic growth. The report focused mainly on adult skills; however, it also recognised how vital 'effective education' for young people is to the UK's ambitions. The review thus emphasised the need to raise young people's aspirations and awareness of the value of skills to them, and outlined critical reforms to General Certificate of Secondary Education qualifications (GCSEs) to improve functional literacy and numeracy. The 2008 Education and Skills Act responded to these recommendations of the Leitch review. However, three years after the review, the UK was still in the bottom half of Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development (OECD) rankings for basic and intermediate skills (Spilsbury & Campbell, 2009). Therefore the UK's workforce needs to up-skill if it is to realise government targets (DIUS, 2007) and to compete with other international countries.

While the underlying sentiment of the Leitch Review was largely supported (Thomson, 2006), many felt the report was inadequate, particularly given that the National Skills Task Force had already recognised that UK skills were below those of competitor countries in 2000 (Wolf, 2007). The review failed to question the qualifications it recommended, such as the apprenticeship model. The impact of the review has certainly dissipated, given that key elements of Leitch's visions like Train to Gain qualifications have not stood the test of time. Further evidence of the move away from Leitch was seen in the appointment of Alison Wolf to review UK vocational education (Wolf, 2011). Wolf has been a staunch critic of the Leitch review (see Wolf, 2007), for instance discussing the contradictory nature of a review which admits that '[h]istory tells us that no one can predict with any accuracy future occupational skills' (Leitch, 2006, p. 13), but fixates on the UK's projected skill needs for the year 2020.

The continued message from UK government is that:

Employers are demanding higher level skills in all sectors; by 2020 there will be 3 million fewer low-skilled jobs in Britain than there are today (DfE, 2010a).

This point, along with allied messages that 40% of jobs in 2020 will require a graduate qualification, have not only been used in policy documents, but were actively disseminated to practitioners as part of material intended for information, advice and guidance to schoolchildren (DCSF, 2009a). Young people without qualifications are predicted to find it increasingly difficult to find and keep employment in future. Indeed, the number of low-skill jobs available to young people is expected to fall dramatically from about 3 million in 2009 to just 600,000 by 2020 (DCSF, 2009b).

Claims about the relationship between and economic competitiveness are far from new. James Callaghan's (1976) 'Great Debate' speech made specific connections between education and the economy. Britain's relative economic

decline at the time was framed within the perceived failure of the education system to produce employable young people in terms of skills, abilities and dispositions. Simmons (2008) argues that such assertions have achieved hegemonic status and have been pushed further by successive governments since Callaghan's speech. However, criticisms of vocational education and training in relation to economic competitiveness have a history in England which stretches back to the late nineteenth century.

However, the core message delivered to young people that they will need higher level skills to compete in tomorrow's labour market is, according to Simmons (2008), a gross over-simplification. Such claims are rooted in the demise of the UK manufacturing base (Lawy, Quinn & Diment, 2009). The Green Paper *Raising Expectations: Staying in Education and Training Post-16* (DCSF, 2007a) showed that in the early 1970s nearly half the UK economy was accounted for by manufacturing, construction and agriculture. By 2007, these traditional sectors accounted for less than a quarter of UK output. Although clearly the number of jobs in these industries has declined, this does not necessarily mean there is less unskilled work (Avis, 2004). Brown, Green and Lauder (2001) noted that the reality of the UK labour market was a marked polarisation between a minority of high-skill jobs and the majority of low-skill, low-waged employment.

Low-skilled jobs still exist in abundance today. Coffield (2000, p. 241) refers to the 'knowledge economy myth', meaning that all indications were and are that the majority of employees will in future require only a low-level vocational training based upon occupational competencies. So despite the prevailing skills mantra, the demand for high level knowledge and skills is exaggerated (Simmons, 2008). The demand for labour in low-skill and low-paid jobs remains a persistent feature of the UK working environment (Aldridge and Tuckett 2007). Department of Trade and Industry figures from 2007 noted 'a shortage of four million people to fill jobs that require no qualifications at all in sectors from service industries to [the declining] manufacturing' (Nash 2007, p. 1).

Spielhofer et al. (2009) show that higher qualifications are associated with employability in later life; but they note that it is not necessarily the qualifications

alone that cause this perceived benefit. Critically it is 'not clear whether, if more young people continue in learning and achieve higher-level qualifications, they will all share the same benefits as seen by those doing so at present' (p. 33). Keep (2008) questions the assumption in Lord Leitch's data that qualifications are the most appropriate marker of skills. Indeed, Roe, Wiseman and Costello (2006) found that 1500 employers suggested that the possession 'of qualifications is less significant when recruiting than personality, good literacy and numeracy, interview performance, and experience at all levels' (p. ii). Furthermore, the OECD (2007b) reported that 'skills other than those indicated by educational attainment, as well as experience, are rewarded in the labour market' (p. 128).

The above discussion highlights that much of the current policy and practice rhetoric around 'upskilling' appears to be misguided and predicated on contestable assumptions about skills, qualifications and the demands of the UK economy even before the recession. Furthermore the UKCES (2009) reported that the UK had actually moved backward in comparison to other OECD countries on measures of low and intermediate skills. Notwithstanding, these mixed messages about the UK's skills position moving forward, the link between participation and social inclusion appears stronger (Atkinson, Cantillon, Marlier & Nolan, 2002). I explore this in the next subsection.

### **1.3.2 Social Exclusion and unemployment**

Social exclusion has been associated with deep-rooted problems of poverty and unemployment exacerbated by social and economic inequalities (Tett, 2003). As such various policies are designed to bring about social justice to ensure that all people are able to participate fully in society. Social exclusion refers to barriers to power as well as more tangible outcomes. Madanipour et al (1998) define social exclusion as:

A multi-dimensional process, in which various forms of exclusion are combined: participation in decision making and political processes, access to employment and material resources, and integration into common cultural processes. When combined they create acute forms of exclusion that find a spatial manifestation in particular neighbourhoods (p.12).

While localised pockets of social exclusion have been documented (e.g. MacDonald, 2007), the socially excluded are not an easily identified homogenous group:

there is no single clear-cut definition of 'social exclusion'. Categories such as the 'unskilled', 'ethnic minorities', 'the unemployed' cover a range of circumstances. (OECD, 1999, p. 15).

Despite the complexity in identifying socially excluded groups and individual differences within such groups, in 1998 18 Policy Action Teams (PATs) were set up within the Cabinet Office to fast track policy development for problems of social exclusion in certain locations. This was a new approach to policy-making involving partnerships between civil servants, professionals, academics, and local people. Each PAT had the task of developing policy strategies. PAT 12 developed strategies for young people and is responsible for the seminal, but often maligned, report *Bridging the Gap: New Opportunities for 16-18 year-olds not in education, employment or training* (SEU, 1999), which set out an action plan related to those young people who do not participate. Bridging the Gap aimed to elucidate a growing body of evidence about the experiences and barriers that some groups of young people face.

In the foreword to *Bridging the Gap* (SEU, 1999, p.6), then Prime Minister Tony Blair stated:

The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience.

As Attwood et al. (2003, p.76) note though '[t]he concern is partly with the personal cost to the young people and partly with the wider economic issues of a substantial proportion of young people failing to develop the skills thought to be of increasing importance to the economy'. The needs of the economy, the individual difficulties faced by young people who lack the education and skills necessary for employment and broader social issues of inequality and disadvantage are brought together in policy documents.

Colley and Hodkinson (2001) are critical of how *Bridging the Gap* and other similar policy documents draw from their evidence base. For instance

correlations between low educational attainment and factors such as unemployment are presented in a way which implies cause and effect in the report. The achievement of qualifications or high education attainment adds to the cultural capital a person holds but obviously does not guarantee work (*ibid.*). *Bridging the Gap* is accused of stereotyping non participation in terms of 'lazy and feckless youth staying in bed until the afternoon, then loafing about and engaging in petty crime' (*ibid.*, p 339). Young people's beliefs about the labour market are also presented as unfounded and irrational, which contradicts the research literature (e.g. Hodkinson, Sparkes & Hodkinson, 1996).

While it is assumed that reducing social exclusion will lead to young people increasing their attainment and skills, Barrow (2000), among others, raises a growing tension between promoting social inclusion and raising achievement. Furthermore, as implied above, part of government motivation for tackling social exclusion is its cost. For instance, it was documented that if attainment of all children in care could be raised to average, there might be a gain to society of around £6 billion in terms of increased productivity over these children's lifetimes (HM Treasury & DfES, 2007). It was estimated that teenage pregnancies cost the NHS £63 million a year (Teenage Pregnancy Strategy Evaluation Team, 2003). In terms of youth offending, the Audit Commission estimated that if effective early intervention had been provided for just one in ten of those young people sentenced to custody each year, public services alone could have saved over £100 million annually (HM Treasury & DfES, 2007). The additional lifetime costs of being not in education, employment or training (NEET) at age 16-18 have been estimated at around £8.1 billion (Coles et al., 2002). While the government appears to want to assist young people, keeping them 'on track' (DCSF, 2007a, p41) also saves potentially billions of pounds at a time when reducing the UK deficit by 2015 is foremost on government agenda.

However, the term social exclusion provides a broad category that can encompass a wide variety of policy concerns which stretch beyond poverty or deprivation based only on material assets (Milbourne, 2002). Tackling social exclusion is considered a key political concern given the links between social exclusion and costs of crime, ill-health, welfare-dependency and social

breakdown (Levitas, 2006). However, it has long been believed that social exclusion requires intervention aimed at young people (Colley, 2003). After all, marginalisation from education in the school years has been linked to later marginalisation from society (Levitas, 2006).

Persistent youth unemployment has often been understood and related to the paradigm of social exclusion (MacDonald & Marsh, 2001). Youth unemployment can be related to various indices of deprivation (DCLG, 2011) including low skills, low income, poor housing, high crime, poor health and familial breakdown in certain areas. Given the complex inter-relations amongst these factors, it is not the case that programmes focussed on improving employability, for instance New Deal, can adequately tackle wider issues of youth unemployment (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007). Often though, policy rhetoric has assumed that the solution to the plurality of social exclusion is paid work (Benn, 2000).

The UK recession of 2008 and 2009 was reported to be the worst in over one hundred years and was occurring as the young people participating in the current study experienced their post-16 transitions<sup>1</sup>. One of the major effects of recession is a rise in unemployment. This has been experienced most acutely for young people, with UK youth unemployment rising to over 20% in 2011 (Wright, 2011). Young people without a university education and those from ethnic minorities have experienced the greatest increases in unemployment (Berthoud, 2009). For instance, unemployment for those young people (aged 16-24) without any qualifications stood at 43.2% in 2009, up over 10% on the previous year (*ibid.*). Many have predicted further rises in unemployment over the remainder of 2011 (Birdwell, Grist & Margo, 2011).

When unemployment rises, young people typically delay their entry into the labour market, instead following education and training pathways (te Riele and Wyn 2005). Whereas in the late 1970s nearly half of 16-year-olds entered the labour market directly, by the late 1990s, only ten per cent did (Pearce and Hillman, 1998). This leads to the 'extended' or 'fractured' transitions considered further in the discussion of transition research in the next chapter (Coles, 1995).

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<sup>1</sup> In late 2011 the UK economy is reported to be again in jeopardy of moving into recession.

MacDonald and Marsh's (2001) research in a socially excluded area of Teeside demonstrated that the issues of youth unemployment are complex. Individual careers typically involved insecurity, instability and flux. Moving into and out of jobs was a typical feature of these young people for whom unemployment was the default status. The low paid and low skill jobs that they typically held for short periods of time offered little opportunity for progression. Research such as this recognises that youth unemployment is not an isolated concern. The careers of the young people typically matched those of their working class parents. This points to the need to consider issues such as class and social reproduction when seeking to understand young people's experiences. Despite this, Labour Government policy has often been criticised for implying that youth unemployment is the fault of ill-prepared young people, rather than accepting the spatial and temporal contexts in which young people experience their trajectories (Byrne, 1999).

Within dominant theories of risk society and the neoliberalisation of subjectivities (Beck 1992; Giddens 2002), traditional social structures and identities such as class, gender and race are often considered less significant in the determination of individual trajectories. It is argued that young people accrue labels of failure which are attributed to their individual deficiencies (Bottrell, 2007). Such individualism is often nonetheless understood in relation to social differentiation, which relegate socioeconomic position and other social identities to the status of 'factors' contributing to deficit or disadvantage (Cohen & Ainley, 2000). When individualised problems are associated with belonging to identifiable social groups, labels of deficit may readily attach to those groups themselves. Such processes are constitutive of further marginalisation (te Riele 2006).

France (2000) suggests that much of the history of youth research has concentrated on, and been driven by, the notion of youth as a social problem. This has resulted in much research either reinforcing the view of 'problem youth' or framing the discussion of young people's risk taking in adult discourses rather than those of young people themselves. Therefore despite a widespread movement away from framing certain young people as current 'delinquents' or

'problems,' toward the non-pejorative language of risk (Foster & Spencer, 2011), the vocabulary of risk and resilience carries with it much of the same normative connotations as previous labels (Bessant, 2001).

### **1.3.3 14-19 education and skills**

The education and training of young people has been identified as of great significance to the UK's economic performance and the life chances of young people. Yet more than a quarter of young people do not achieve Level 2 qualifications by the age of 19 (DCSF, 2009b). The 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper (DfES, 2005) and World Class Skills (DIUS, 2007) laid the foundation for the 14-19 reform programme. The reform sought a responsive further education system with a focus on skills, employability and social mobility. The aim of the 14-19 reform programme is to ensure that every young person, by the age of 19, has had the education or training that prepares him or her to 'succeed in life' (DfES, 2005, p.45).

However, the relative awareness and perceived importance of 14-19 education varies across audiences. While it has been a matter of debate within policy and research arenas, the majority of those outside these areas do not recognise 14-19 as a continuous phase of education (Lumby & Foskett, 2005). Of course this is likely to be because at present compulsory education concludes at 16 years of age and even those who remain at their school's sixth form see this as a distinct change (Gardner, 2007). Moreover, the national curriculum ends at 16 and GCSE qualifications are often assumed to determine post-16 choices (Hodgson & Spours, 2008). While this may be an unwieldy assumption, post-16 programmes are very different, typically having a reduced focus in comparison, vocational qualifications often focusing on one occupational area (Coffield et al, 2008).

Given the current discontinuity in education at 16, it may seem strange that policymakers and educationalists have argued in favour of a 14-19 phase since the 1980s (Hodgson & Spours, 2008). As noted previously the primary reason for emphasising and reforming 14-19 education and skills stems from relatively

low participation post-16 and the need to increase skills, economic competitiveness and social cohesion in the UK (e.g. DfES, 2005). A second reason for reforming 14-19 education suggested by Lumby and Foskett (2005) is that young people increasingly wish to make choices and move beyond the traditional school experience at a younger age. They suggest that 14-year-olds ought to be given increasing opportunity to focus their education and training, including selecting vocational pathways. Much 14-19 policy assumes that young people are ready for such decisions at 14 years of age, whereas there is little research evidence to support this view (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001).

14-19 education in the UK is still a changing and contested area (Higham & Yeomans, 2009). Under the former Labour government the emphasis of 14-19 reforms was upon developing a vocational alternative to established academic pathways from GCSEs to A Levels that carried a parity of esteem (Hodgson & Spours, 2008). The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition seems to share the wider view, typical of educationalists and research communities, that 14-19 reforms are about transforming learning for all young people (*ibid.*). Indeed, recent policy documents (e.g. Wolf, 2011) recognise the unhelpful false dichotomy between academic and vocational pursuits, emphasising the need for attaining literacy and numeracy qualifications regardless of young people's orientation. Despite these recent changes, policy has not yet addressed historic curricular, qualification and institutional discontinuities across the 14-19 phase.

Alongside RPA, considered further below, the other key Labour Government legacy for 14-19 education was the introduction of vocational diplomas in 14 subject areas. 14-19 diplomas offer young people vocational routes to employment and Higher Education (Leigh, 2008). Diplomas are available at three levels allowing for progression across the 14-19 phase with study in multiple locations including their school, local FE Colleges and relevant workplaces. While the diplomas were intended to offer a viable alternative to academic routes through GCSEs and A Level qualifications, the response to the diploma programme to date has been mixed at best. Schools have found the programmes difficult to finance particularly in the face of funding cuts and student response has been negative (McCrum, Macfadyen, Fuller & Kempe, 2009). Leigh (2008) identified two further problems with the implementation of

the Diplomas, namely that they risk complicating an already complex array of qualifications available for young people and that while work experience is considered to be an essential part of a diploma, in 2008 nearly half of consortia offering Diplomas had not involved employers.

More recently, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government commissioned Alison Wolf to conduct an independent review of 14-19 vocational education (Wolf, 2011). While the review evidenced the necessity of vocational education, Wolf highlighted that potentially hundreds of thousands of young people are not following courses which offer a successful pathway into employment or higher education. The review reported that less than 50% of students have English and maths GCSE at grades A\*-C by 16 years of age and recommends that post-16 provision should address this gap. Wolf also recommended improved information, advice and guidance (IAG) regarding vocational education in light of a simplified system given that the English vocational education system is complex and opaque by international standards and currently schools may be incentivised to steer young people into easier options (*ibid.*). The Wolf Review does not make any specific recommendations about vocational diplomas, despite Wolf's previously voiced disdain at the lack of true practical learning amongst Level 2 vocational programmes (Ananiadou, Jenkins & Wolf, 2004). Looking beyond the Wolf Review, it appears that more truly practical programmes such as those offered by the new University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools may address some of the limitations of the vocational 14-19 curriculum in 2011 (Edge, 2010).

#### **1.3.4 Raising the participation age (RPA)**

Historically the UK has had low participation rates in education and training. In the most recent comparison, the UK was only 24th out of 30 on rates of participation in 17-year-olds compared to other OECD countries (UKCES, 2009). As mentioned in the earlier rationale section, the 2008 Education and Skills Act will increase the age of participation in education and training of young people to age 17 by 2013 and 18 by 2015 in England. This means that changes would first apply to children who started secondary school in 2008

(DCSF, 2007a). This is an Act of historic significance, raising the minimum age at which a young person can leave schooling for the first time since 1972<sup>1</sup>. Under this new legislation all young people will be required to be working towards an appropriate qualification accredited by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). Young people who have not yet reached the age of 18 or not yet attained a Level 3 qualification will either a) participate in appropriate full-time education or training; b) participate in training as part of an apprenticeship or c) be working for more than 20 hours a week with sufficient relevant education and training alongside their work.

RPA was largely ignored in the run up to the May 2010 general election. However, as part of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government's *Spending Review* (HM Treasury, 2010) and the White Paper *The Importance of Teaching*, (DfE, 2010b) the Government made clear its continued commitment to raising the participation age, although it has delayed any decision regarding enforcing the act for the foreseeable future. Interestingly the Act only applies to England; the Act enables powers for the Welsh Government to implement similar measures. There are no plans for RPA in Scotland.

RPA in England targets a relative minority of young people who do not participate in education or training, namely those in NEET and jobs without training (JWT) categories. However RPA will not be able to take advantage of successful implementation of 14-19 vocational diplomas. RPA in 2015 appears to rely on employers continuing to hire young people, but allowing them to attend training (Waugh et al, 2008). Many have suggested that this will dissuade many employers from hiring under 18s (Corney, 2009). Still many questions remained unanswered around RPA, for instance what exactly counts as participation and for what reasons might young people be excused from participating (Moore, 2008).

In 1918 following recommendations of the Lewis Report, the school leaving age was raised to 14 years and again in 1947 a further act raised the leaving age to 15 years and established the tripartite system of grammar, technical and

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<sup>1</sup> The school leaving age rose from 15 to 16 years of age in 1972. Prior to this in 1947 the leaving age rose from 14 to 15 years of age.

secondary modern schools. In 1973 the school leaving age was raised to 16, while associated youth employment schemes introduced thereafter attempted to encourage the transition from school to work at this point, for those not progressing to Higher Education. At this time, jobs were created for 16 year olds through schemes such as the 1975 Job Creation Programme (Jones & Bell, 2002), while employers were given various incentives under guises such as the Youth Employment Subsidy and Young Workers Scheme to recruit unemployed young people.

The 1918 Fisher Education Act required local authorities to establish free and obligatory Day Continuation Schools for all young people not in full-time education (Simmons, 2008). Although the age of participation was raised to 14 through the act, mirroring current reforms attendance was initially to be until the age of 17, rising to 18 by 1925. However, the proposed Day Continuation Schools, like many other proposals following the end of the First World War, went largely unfulfilled. Few of these institutions were ever established and only one authority implemented the 1918 Act in full.

The Butler Act following World War Two was the second attempt to raise participation to 18 years of age. The 1944 Act sought to expand both school and post-school education. The major provision of the Act was to raise the minimum school leaving age to 15 through the creation of an integrated system of primary and secondary schools (Simmons, 2008). The Act did stimulate the rapid growth of post-school education across England (Lucas, 2004). But like the previous Act, its intention for free training this time through 'County Colleges' failed to take hold (Simmons, 2008).

The running theme across the various RPA incarnations since 1918 is the belief that increasing education and training will enhance employment beyond participation. It is assumed that continuing in learning for longer brings benefits for individuals, the economy and society. RPA potentially tackles social exclusion, since young people who leave education and training at 16 are disproportionately from poor families (Spielhofer et al., 2009). Those who leave school early without 'good' skills and qualifications are less likely to get a 'good' job, while those who stay in education are more likely to gain further

qualifications and are liable to earn more in the future (DCSF, 2007b). While there appears to be benefits to individuals, one can clearly see from policy documents that the government gains economically from RPA. The move is anticipated to give over £2 billion in additional productivity benefit to the economy per cohort (Hunt & McIntosh, 2007).

In order to achieve this ambitious reform the government highlights a need to find a suitable route for every young person (DCSF, 2009a), suggesting that changes to provision are necessary given previously cited low participation figures. Reducing the proportion of young people who are NEET is fundamental to the success of RPA. Being out of education, employment or training between the ages of 16 and 18 is considered a waste of young people's potential and their contribution to society (DCSF, 2009c). Eliminating one cohort of NEETs would save the government estimated lifetime costs of over £7 billion (Confederation of British Industry, 2008). Evidence shows that spending time NEET is a major predictor of later unemployment, low income, depression and poor mental health (DCSF, 2007b). It is also linked to a number of other unwanted short-term outcomes, including low levels of attainment and high teenage conception.

The number of young people (aged 16-24) NEET was nearing one million at the beginning of 2011, at their highest level since records were first taken in 2005 (DfE, 2011). Programmes pioneered during the former Labour Government's last years of office to reduce NEETs were losses at the hands of spending cuts in 2010, despite evidence of their impact (Maguire et al, 2009). These included Entry to Employment (E2E) which was a work-based learning programme for those young people aged 16-18 who are not yet ready or able to enter an Apprenticeship, employment or further learning opportunities. Also Activity Agreements were aimed specifically at re-engaging 16- and 17-year-olds who have been long term NEET. The Activity Agreement was a personalised action plan and involves the young person working with a Personal Adviser.

The success of RPA is still considered reliant upon expansion of the apprenticeship programme. All suitably qualified 16- to 18-year-olds will be assured of an offer of an Apprenticeship place from 2013, while the government

aims to increase apprenticeship numbers by 100,000 by 2014 (DCSF, 2009b). The government pledged increased apprenticeship funding in 2011/2012, although meeting these targets of course relies upon employers offering places. Apprenticeships have been earmarked as being appropriate for those who might currently pursue JWT (DCSF, 2009c); however, there have been repeated calls for the current UK apprenticeship system to be overhauled (Brockmann, Clarke & Winch, 2010).

The government cites research that shows support for RPA. Both from the general public, where 9 out of 10 people surveyed supported the idea of education or training until the age of 18 (Homeyard, 2007), while 58% of young people themselves support the idea (Edge Learner Forum, 2009). However, research conducted by the Learning and Skills Network (LSN) gives a different picture. Still, their public opinion survey showed a convincing 71% of parents agreed with the idea. However, when they asked teenagers, only a slim majority (51%) were in favour (Villeneuve-Smith, Marshall & Munoz, 2007). Furthermore 71% of teenagers want to retain their right to choose and 80% of parents in the LSN survey said that teenagers who are not motivated to learn will not comply (Villeneuve-Smith et al, 2007). A survey conducted amongst members by the British Youth Council echo the findings of the LSN, where only 39% of respondents agreed with raising the participation age (British Youth Council, 2007).

Fletcher, Corney and Stanton (2007) point to a range of issues that remain unaddressed ahead of RPA. One important current contradiction surrounds Level 2 being cited as the Qualification Level needed for employment, while currently many 17 year olds seek work after completing a year-long Level 2 vocational course. There is also conflict between the current preventative system designed to tackle social exclusion, and the Education and Skills Act which places an onus of responsibility on young people themselves to participate; likewise, NEET Strategies (DCSF, 2009c) pose an inherent conflict between expecting young people to choose to participate post-16 and providing flexible provision which aims to prevent disengagement.

Many question the likelihood of eradicating NEETs and JWTs (Maguire, 2010). It is a narrow assumption that NEETs choose to do nothing after school and that all young people will make a rational choice as to which kind of learning to pursue at 16 and where to continue their learning. Research that considers the experience of NEET and JWT young people is discussed further in chapter two. RPA will not succeed without support for young people to participate until at least 18, and to overcome barriers that may prevent them from doing so. It appears from policy documents that the government is aware of these barriers and that barriers may affect young people cumulatively. There is no doubt that raising the participation age requires a culture change in young people, their parents and the education and employment system; yet it is debatable whether this can happen, either in time for 2015 or at all (Corney, 2009).

RPA has clear implications for much needed research and gives limited time to research those young people who are currently able to leave education and training before 18. Furthermore research is necessary to investigate the provision that is suitable and appropriate for young people, given that the government wishes to ensure that there is a high quality place in learning available in every area that is suitable and appropriate for each young person. The government has tended to underplay the effects on young people of peer groups and place (LGA, 2007), in spite of the recognition of peer groups and location as influential factors for young people in the Children's Plan (DCSF, 2007c). Therefore research should consider such wider factors.

The wider context considered above shows how the research problem underpinning this thesis that was reached on the basis of a small, local sensitising study, has become more and more relevant since I commenced that study in 2007. Questions have already been raised about the suitability of 14-19 education and particularly the vocational qualifications that it is assumed 'hard to reach' young people would be most likely to pursue (Attwood, Croll & Hamilton, 2004). Understanding the needs and experiences of young people responds to policy both from the UK and Europe (CEC, 2001), while a focus on 'hard to reach' young people holds relevance to tackling social exclusion. Of course RPA means that the opportunity to research 'hard to reach' young people who may not participate at 16 may exist only until 2013. The change in

UK government occurred after the data collection period, however, the 'credit crunch' and recession impacted on the young people studied and were indeed mentioned by many of them as they recounted their experiences.

### **1.3.5 Structural influences on youth transitions**

Youth transitions are often theorised in terms of structural concerns, such as gender, class and ethnicity that impact young people's lives and trajectories from education to work (te Riele, 2006). Various research considering the post-16 transition has demonstrated the impact of social class, gender and ethnicity upon educational opportunity and experience (e.g. Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Bynner, 2001; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007). But few examples from the literature explore the detailed lives of individual young people, nor how their life histories, lifestyles and dispositions to learning evolve and change over time. The focus in this research is upon responding to the need to research individual experience. It does not seek to characterise the plight of white, working class youth as a group, but compares amongst a group that was expected to fit these structures. This is therefore not a study of youth subculture as is the case in certain relevant studies (Willis, 1977; Ball & Gewirtz, 1997; Colley, James, Tedder & Diment, 2003), rather the study seeks to interpret young people's meanings across the period of their post-16 transition.

Bynner (2001) finds that stratification by class, education, ethnicity, religion and gender all reveal considerable variability in the kind of transition outcomes. Hodkinson et al. (1996) amongst others theorise that school-to-work transitions, are affected by a combination of structure and agency, rendering the process of acculturation far more complex than a passive absorption of predictable classed, gendered and raced outcomes. Agency plays its part, since habitus is relational and dynamic, constructed partly by the dispositions of the students themselves as they construct their own identities. Still one's habitus must be a 'choosable' identity for the individual, one that falls within their 'horizons for action' (Colley et al., 2003). Bourdieu's concept of habitus includes individual aspects of identity, as well as collective predispositions structured by factors

such as social class and gender. At the same time, habitus must be understood in the context of the 'fields' within which individuals act.

The theoretical framework briefly described above tends to stem from Bourdieusian theory of practice (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Bloomer (2001) gives an account of why Bourdieusian Sociology, as both a theoretical and epistemological position, is particularly suited to studying the post-16 transition. While young people may indicate a great deal of agency themselves, research makes clear that they are not entirely the agents of free will they may suppose themselves to be (Bloomer, 2001). Gender differences, family background, prior attainments and institutional cultures are reflected in choices of destination, dispositions to knowledge and learning and occupational aspirations. It is not therefore possible to theorise young people's experiences of learning on the basis of their knowledge-making, studentship and other agentic activities alone, instead fields of practice allow all the influences on a person's habitus to be recognised.

For Bourdieu (1977), individual action and attitude is culturally and socially situated. The 'dispositions' of individual beliefs and perceptions are located within 'positions' or social structures. Within these social structures Bourdieu gives preeminence to social class, but others that have applied his theorising to the post-16 transition, such as Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), see gender or ethnicity as situating dispositions. Habitus encapsulates the ways in which a person's beliefs, ideas and preferences are individually subjective but also influenced by the objective social networks and cultural traditions in which that person lives.

However, this theoretical framework has not been without its critics. Brown (1987) for instance suggests that Bourdieu (1977) uses habitus in a structurally deterministic way, and that it is derived, in an essentially one-way process, from a broad and undifferentiated (working) class culture. He coins the concept of 'frame of reference' to avoid such determinism. Rees et al. (1997) point out that characteristic transitions vary from one locality to another. The theorisation of geographical difference is less developed, as theory has focussed upon the

location of individuals within a spatially undifferentiated social structure of class, gender and ethnic backgrounds.

As mentioned above this research does not attempt a classed or gendered analysis. If and when these structural issues are key according to young people's constructions of their experiences and understandings then the issues are acknowledged. But such structural concerns did not frame the exploration of the research problem. Lather (1992) suggests that we all live in webs of multiple representations of class, race and gender amongst other structures. Because their meanings vary even within the same individual, identity is constantly being reconstructed. Meanings are made within the experiences in which young people are located. As such my focus is upon how individuals construct such experiences and the influences upon their transitions over time.

#### **1.4 Overview of thesis structure**

This thesis proceeds through six chapters. In this opening chapter I have introduced the research problem and provided the context that has led to the study of particular young people over their post-16 transitions. A rationale for the work was presented which justified the study of the research problem as a piece of doctoral research. Critically the time available to address this research problem is drawing to a close, therefore the research was situated within the context of current UK 14-19 reforms and in particular RPA. Given the policy change afoot at the time of this study, the contribution that this research could make is considerable, since the longitudinal experience of 14-19 year olds is reported two years before RPA. The research also holds practical implications and fills a gap in the field of educational research by combining the study of under-researched 'hard to reach' young people and the post-16 transition.

In the next chapter further background to the research is presented and literature is reviewed. The chapter further situates the research and demonstrates the gap in the field that this research fits. The first section of the chapter focuses upon issues of labelling as they relate to young people and policy related to participation. The second section then considers the definition

of 'hard to reach' applied to the young people who participated in this study, arguing for that term rather than other associated labels. The third section of the chapter considers the definition of transition and then critiques research that addresses post-16 transitions. Rather than copiously reviewing all literature that bears relevance to the findings, literature is also introduced later in chapters four and five as relevant to the analysis there. Thus the literature review chapter considers particularly relevant research to review that both demonstrates the need for this research and critiques the prior work which this thesis builds upon. On the basis of the relevant literature reviewed and definition of terms used the chapter finally states the research questions investigated by the research.

Chapter three presents a methodological framework determined on the basis of paradigmatic assumptions and the research problem itself. Methodological decisions are justified in this chapter, which justifies why other theoretical frameworks were not suitable for this enquiry. Previous research is again considered to justify the methodological choices made. The chapter outlines the adaptation of grounded theory method used, discussing how the method and analytical framework of the approach have been used flexibly in this study. The second section of the chapter details the method used to collect data. It discusses the sample of young people who participated and how they were identified as 'hard to reach'. The necessity of a longitudinal design is argued for, as well as the use of two cohorts of participants. The interviews that were held with the young people who participated are described and ethical considerations outlined.

Chapter four presents the first part of the analysis and discussion chapters. The interpretation of the findings are organised thematically with previous literature introduced as relevant in order to discuss the analysis. In this chapter the first two themes are interpreted. Ahead of the discussion of analytical themes, the first section considers the inherent issue of labelling raised in chapter two. I discuss the experience of the participants during their school years and consider why practitioners may have considered them 'hard to reach'. This theme then considers evidence of labelling that the young people experienced and their awareness of this. The first theme *school and learning identities* explores the young peoples' developing identities and challenges the

assumption that the young people's experience of school 'damages' their learning identities which then affects dispositions towards learning and education beyond school. The second theme discussed in this chapter, *imagined futures*, considers participants' thoughts regarding their longer-term futures. It explores how participants' imagined futures change over time and posits an alternative typology of imagined futures (cf. Ball, Macrae & Maguire, 1999).

Chapter five presents and discusses two further analytical themes. These two themes move away from focusing upon understanding individuals to taking stock of wider structural influences on the post-16 transition. The first theme *transformations, turning points and the post-16 transition* theorises the longitudinal experiences of several of the young people, comparing across these transitions. The analysis moves beyond the simplistic notion that these young people were in transition, exploring the turning points and transformations that make their transitions complex and fragile. The final theme *constrained choices – structure versus agency* problematises the notion that the young people 'chose' their post-16 destinations and discusses the perceived agency they described compared against a range of structural factors which constrained their alleged choices and therefore impacted upon their post-16 transitions.

Finally chapter six summarises the key research findings and compares across the four analytical themes discussed, assessing the contribution to the field of research in which it fills a gap. In this final chapter I return to the rationale and contribution of the study suggested in this first chapter to assess its impact and to reconsider the policy and practice context in light of the findings presented in the two preceding chapters. This concluding chapter considers the strengths and limitations of the research project. It then draws conclusions in terms of the implications of the research and its recommendations for policy, practice and further research.

## Chapter two

### 2. Literature review

In the previous chapter I introduced the current research study, outlining the personal context and sensitising study which has led me to study the post-16 transitions of 'hard to reach' young people. The context and rationale for selecting this research problem was delineated, with particular focus placed upon RPA and the associated need to understand the experiences of young people at the margins of participation. The issue of young people who do not participate in education or training post-16 and their experiences and transitions is a constitutive part of the government's agenda to raise skill levels and social inclusion. However, this narrative immediately labels young people:

By defining acceptable behaviour and thus the boundaries of social inclusion tightly, they [UK government] label potentially large numbers of individuals, groups and communities who live partly different lives and hold partly different values or priorities as excluded (Colley & Hodkinson, 2001, p. 354).

Language is important; it helps to define and frame a discussion. But language can also pathologise. The application of the dominant discourse maintains and reinforces an asymmetrical power differential, with those who do not participate rendered 'less' because they have not followed the normative ideal (Lee & Breen, 2007). Ultimately, those students that leave education early, are labelled with terms such as 'losers', 'underachievers', 'unsuccessful' and 'unambitious' (Fine, 1990; Finn, 1989; Howarth, 2004; Rappaport, 2000). They are defined in terms not of who they are, but the normative standards that they have not met. These concerns apply to all labels used in this field. I indicate below, that apparent synonyms for young people like 'youth' and 'adolescent' (France, 2000) can carry both deep connotations and refer to different bodies of literature.

I have referred to the young people this study focuses upon as 'hard to reach'. Whilst I recognise that all language constructs meaning, the phrase 'hard to reach' is non-pejorative and does not stigmatise young people or carry ideological baggage associated with the other terms I might have used. In the

first section of this chapter I make the case for using this terminology, rather than other frequently used labels such as disaffected or marginalised.

This chapter is organised into four sections. In the first section I further explore the issue of labelling in relation to young people and specifically justify the use of the term 'hard to reach' in this study. In the second section I review some of the literature which shapes current understanding of 'hard to reach' young people. In the third section I focus on the particular period the young people who participated in the research experienced, the post-16 transition. I first consider how transition is a term contested in the literature and then review several key pieces of research in this field of educational research. In the final section I recapitulate the focus of the current research in light of the literature reviewed, before ending the chapter with the research questions which guide the study.

## **2.1 Labelling and 'hard to reach' young people**

While it is necessary to identify specific segments of the school population for successful intervention, labelling of problem populations may create stigma, self-fulfilling prophecies, or inappropriate attention on certain individuals to the neglect of real problem sources (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001, p. 331).

A label is a social construct applied by others that can come to define a person. Writing in the context of deviancy, Howard Becker (1963) suggested that an act only becomes deviant when others perceive and identify it as such. Therefore, labelling depends upon a range of factors, including the actor, the audience, and when and where the act occurs. Since individuals' self-concepts are largely derived from the responses of those around them, a label can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, meaning that 'the deviant identification becomes the controlling one' (Becker, 1963, pp. 33-34). Becker argued that the self-fulfilling prophecy was by no means inevitable. Nevertheless, a prominent criticism of labelling theory is that it is too deterministic. Theoretically, the self-fulfilling prophecy assumes that once a person has been labelled, their deviance (or other label) will increase. Critics like Akers (1975) suggested that individuals might simply choose to be deviant regardless of the labelling process. While a

labelled individual is assumed to be passive (Gouldner, 1975), young people can choose to partake in behaviour and to ignore a label.

The logic of the classificatory label is very exactly that of racism, which stigmatizes its victims by imprisoning them in a negative essence (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 28).

The power to stigmatise an individual is a chief concern of the labelling process. 'Categorising people may also stigmatize them, thereby making it harder for them to reach their full potential' (Sugarman, 1986, p. 52). Labelling potentially imposes the stigma, defined by the 'powerful other', upon the individual. For instance to label a young person as disaffected can ignore the impact of their family situation, the local labour market, surrounding professional systems or the framework of relevant policy (Piper & Piper, 2000).

Researchers have drawn parallels between Becker's theorising on deviancy and 'disadvantaged' or 'excluded' youth as classified in policy. Nearly 20 years ago Bessant (1993) noted the use of the label 'disadvantaged young people' in policy aimed at increasing participation in education. Such labelling has only become more endemic over time.

Terms such as disaffected youth, the socially excluded, the underclass and status-zero all suggest that the only pertinent divisions in society are between those included in full social membership and those who are not. The inequalities and problems of the majority, the included, the overclass, are masked. It is implied that they alone constitute society while the rest are in a sense detached (Piper & Piper, 2000 p. 82).

What the authors are suggesting is that an important effect of labelling is its construction of inequality both in terms of how young people view themselves and how they are viewed from outside. Education practices and the labelling of individuals may maintain the inequality experienced by young people (Reid, 1999).

Plummer (1979) suggested that the labelling perspective raises the issue of power. Labels represent societies' rules and norms applied to individuals. The process of labelling espoused above suggests that the power lies in the audience applying the label to the actor lacking free will. For a label to stick, those applying it must have the power (Kassem, 2009). In educational contexts

it is widely assumed that teachers hold the power to a) label their students and in doing so to b) enact behaviour fitting of the label, as well as c) potentially interpreting action in terms of labels previously applied (Higgs & Tarsi, 1997).

### **2.1.1 Labelling young people**

Labelling as it is applied to young people is both an identity that is given and also one that is received. In this section I broadly consider the connotation of 'youth' and then highlight some of the key policy labels that have been applied to young people. While the United Nations officially define youth as anyone between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four inclusive (Gidley, 2002) others take different start and end points for a definition of youth (e.g. Foster & Naidoo, 2001). None, according to Dwyer and Wynn (2001) recognise the complexity and change which characterise young people today.

There is also a distinction which can readily be drawn between psychological conceptions of youth as a developmental stage, perhaps synonymous with the contestable term adolescence (Muncie, 2004), and sociological viewpoints which often consider youth as a social problem to be deconstructed (Roberts, 2003).

Any attempt to classify 'youth' belies the inherent diversity and heterogeneity, as well as the burgeoning individuality of contemporary youth (Gidley, 2002, p.3).

The label 'youth' can imply both a developmental stage and a societal problem depending upon the paradigm in which one is working. Psychological theorising assumes that youth equates to adolescence, a stage of physical growth and social identity. Several researchers in the field believe that this theorising holds inherent limitations (Wyn & White, 1997; Skelton, 2002; te Riele, 2006). It fails to appreciate individual differences amongst young people, underestimates the role of wider social and cultural contexts in development, and risks stigmatising those who are not developing typically. Nevertheless, several sociological researchers continue to use the term 'adolescent' without acknowledging these concerns (e.g. France, 2000; Raffo & Reeves, 2000; Colley, 2003).

Rather than a sweeping categorisation based on age, it is more useful to perceive youth as a social (and changing) construct' (te Riele, 2006, p. 132).

Dwyer and Wyn (2001), amongst others, provide evidence that youth is not experienced as part of a linear transition from child to adult. Evidence for more contemporary youth transitions is considered in the latter part of this chapter. While preferring use of the term 'young people', Wyn and White (1997) call for youth to be understood in its local and historical context, therefore implying the need for studies of youth subculture.

However, although studies of youth subculture may respond to the need to recognise the heterogeneity of youth, Shildrick and MacDonald (2006) critiqued studies of youth subculture which typically focused on 'the stylistic art of a few' (p. 128). They argue for a recognition of social divisions and inequalities in youth subcultures. Furthermore few studies appreciate how aspects of young people's leisure and cultural lives play out over time. Given that social class and inequalities shape youth cultural identities, 'the postmodern tendency to celebrate the fragmented, fleeting and free-floating nature of contemporary youth culture becomes difficult to sustain' (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2006, p. 126). While increased globalisation and consumption may lead youths from different social backgrounds to hold similar values and subcultures (Muggleton, 2000), to ignore the impact of class background on youth culture overlooks the socially stratified life courses that youths follow (Roberts, 2005).

Youth sub-cultural studies may also miss the people who choose not to participate in these cultures (Hollands, 2002). Several studies have concluded that cultural choice as described by post-subcultural perspectives are found only for the more privileged sections of dominant cultural groups (e.g. Loader, 1996; Ball et al., 2000; Pilkington, 2004), 'social and economic constraint reverberates through the youth cultural and leisure experiences of less advantaged young people' (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2006, p.133).

A relatively small number of studies, such as du Bois-Reymond (1998), recognise a self-indulgent youthfulness. These contemporary conceptions of youth recognise that for young people time is precious and therefore life needs to be lived to the full (Brooks, 2006). These articles challenge other discourses

(e.g. Maguire et al., 2001), by suggesting that it is the present rather than the future which is of greater importance to young people (du Bois-Reymond, 1998). Indeed, du Bois-Reymond (1998) presents a group of Dutch young people as not wanting to commit themselves. This suggests a certain hedonism in youth, with young people potentially 'living for the weekend' (Maguire et al., 2001, p. 199).

Next I consider those labels linked to non-participation that can be considered policy constructs. Young people who do not participate post-16 are labelled as either NEET or JWT and both are considered stigmatic in the literature (Yates & Payne, 2006; Lawy, Quinn & Diment, 2009). Unlike the more persistent 'person labels' considered above, these labels were created in policy and presumably with RPA will become redundant in 2015 as policy shifts again.

#### *Policy labels – NEET and JWT*

Yates and Payne (2006) recognise that NEET is a label with both negative connotations and a perceived link to social exclusion. However, the conceptual assumption that being NEET leads to social exclusion, fails to appreciate the variety of reasons for being NEET and the transience of this destination for some young people. It is thus a label that subsumes a very heterogeneous mix of young people and those falling under its rubric display very different characteristics and life situations (*ibid.*).

In the first quarter of 2011, 8.3 per cent of 16- to 18-year-olds were classified as NEET but rates vary considerably with age: 5 per cent of 16-year-olds, 8 per cent of 17-year-olds and 12 per cent of 18-year-olds (DfE, 2011). For most young people classified as such, being NEET is a temporary outcome as they move between different education and training options over the three years after they leave school – surveys estimate that only 1 per cent of young people are NEET across the ages of 16 to 18 (DCSF, 2007b). Therefore to be labelled NEET does not tend to lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Nevertheless, Bynner and Parsons (2002) find that parents, social class, location and attainment all influence NEET status.

Yates and Payne (2006) argued that NEET is a problematic term that defines young people in terms of what they are not and fails to acknowledge the heterogeneous group of young people behind the label. They recognise a conflict that persists today between identifying different groups that make up the NEET population (see Spielhofer et al., 2009, for a recent example) and a policy perspective that 'tends to eschew this holistic focus, and specifically to identify being NEET as a negative situation, conceptually connected to a locus of disadvantage' (Yates & Payne, 2006, p. 330).

Yates and Payne interviewed young people and Connexions Personal Advisors as part of research to measure the impact of Connexions<sup>1</sup>. Their results indicated problems with the classification NEET. Aside from issues around the negativity of the label, many NEETs were not necessarily at risk of social exclusion. Indeed, some were passing through the NEET category, while others had chosen instead of education, employment or training, for instance, to care for very young children. However, evidence shows that NEETs are likely to face other significant problems (CBI, 2008), such as involvement in crime and poor health, therefore their non-participation can risk 'diverting attention away from the range of other, often quite profound, risks and difficulties that they face' (Yates & Payne, 2006, p. 342).

Yates and Payne (2006) also identify a further problem in the use of the NEET label. The focus on non-participation can lead to emphasis being placed on and budgets being targeted towards efforts to move these young people into education or work with training. However, while this may 'fix' the problem in terms of the defined label, the related, multiple and profound problems which may be faced by those who are NEET still remain. A concomitant problem is a focus on those NEETs who can be moved into education or training, rather than on efforts aimed at preventing young people becoming NEETs, or putting the focus upon more persistent NEETs (Maguire & Payne, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> Connexions is a service for all young people, giving 13-19 year olds independent impartial information, advice, guidance and practical help in preparing for adult and working life. Their aim is to engage all young people in learning and/or work.

The UK government has long been committed to ensuring that as many young people as possible engage with education or training post-16 and achieve a level 2 qualification, often considered to be the level indicative of employability (HM Treasury, 2007). This therefore highlights the need to tackle NEETs, but also those young people who are in jobs without training (JWT; i.e. young people in jobs without accredited training at least at Level 2). JWT is another label originating in policy, which is strongly associated with high levels of job turnover and NEET group entry (Maguire & Rennison, 2005).

JWT is generally conceived of as a negative outcome, even though these young people have gained employment, often in difficult circumstances (Lawy et al., 2009). From the policy perspective, the JWT group is problematic. On one hand these young people are employed at a time when 20% of their peers are not, but they do not count towards participation in education and training even though some JWT receive in-house training or previously attended further education (Corney, 2009). In short, on the one hand JWT is a problematic label for education and training policy and the ideal of full participation, on the other the category is actually deemed positive according to employment policy, particularly in light of the recession.

Importantly, both JWT and NEET policy labels are often alien to young people themselves, who more often see their non-participation according to policy ideals in a positive light, for example JWT young people often construct their experience in terms of career building (Maguire, 2010). This highlights that although government may hold the power to create the labels NEET and JWT, if young people do not perceive their position as negative, or are not aware of the labels, then stigmatisation and damage to individual identity do not occur on account of the labelling alone.

### **2.1.2 A considered label – ‘Hard to reach’**

A wide variety of terms can be used to label young people who either are not participating in education or training or are at risk of not participating (te Riele, 2006). An interchangeable use of terms is characteristic of the literature in the

field, which appears to assume that the likes of 'hard to reach', 'disaffected', 'excluded' and 'marginalised' are synonyms. In this section I argue for the use of the term 'hard to reach' to describe this type of young person, after considering the various terms used currently in the literature. I select this term because compared to others it is less pejorative and does not immediately place blame upon the labelled individual. This choice is important, given the discussion around labelling presented thus far and that 'the power to name a social problem has vast implications for the policies considered suitable to address it' (Silver, 1994, p. 533).

Attwood, Croll and Hamilton (2003) use the terms 'disaffected' and 'disengaged' interchangeably. However, they recognise that these terms carry a set of assumptions about the characteristics of young people that may not apply to all of their participants who were attending pre-16 FE provision at a college, after having stopped attending school. For this reason Colley and Hodkinson (2001) note that 'Bridging the Gap' (SEU, 1999) uses the term 'non-participants' rather than the previously popular policy term 'disaffected', given the pejorative connotations of that term (Ford, 1999). Notwithstanding this important point, there is surely a difference in meaning between disaffected and disengaged.

McNamara (1998) defines disaffection as 'an integrated set of negative attitudes, beliefs and behaviours with respect to the demands of school life generally and with respect to academic domains in particular' (p. 4). Therefore when used in the educational literature, disaffection refers to dislike of school. However, Solomon and Rogers (2001) argue that disaffection is a more complex phenomenon that is influenced by numerous interrelating factors and can be manifested in various ways including disengagement, referring to actual resistance to schooling (Munns & McFadden, 2000). Therefore while semantically different, it might appear that disaffection can lead to disengagement. On the other hand, Reid (1999) considers disengagement not as an outcome of disaffection, but a separate term which places the problem with the individual who is resisting the norms.

Holroyd and Armour (2003) provide a rare interrogation of the meaning of disaffection in educational research and the variety of synonyms which are

often used in its place. They argue that numerous terms define a range of behaviours that are indicative of disaffection. Therefore for Holroyd and Armour disaffection is an overarching term and popular labels in the literature such as 'disenfranchised' (Kinder, Harland, Wilkin & Wakefield, 1995; Riley & Rustique-Forrester, 2002), 'behavioural problems' (Sanders & Hendry, 1997), 'marginalised' (te Riele, 2006), 'alienated' and 'disengaged' (Steer, 2000) all describe elements of disaffection. This is a slightly different view than that of Solomon and Rogers (2001) above.

Holroyd and Armour (2003) also consider some of the causes of disaffection, giving low self-esteem, poverty, broken families, drug use, unemployment and involvement in crime as examples. Heathcote-Elliott and Walters (2000) organise these causal factors under three broad domains; cognitive, behavioural and affective. Steer (2000) does recognise that despite being given a common label 'disaffected young people are not all a homogeneous group' (p.2). Indeed Holroyd and Armour (2003) recognise that the majority of young people manage the risks and pressures placed upon them without becoming disaffected. Still though, this is rarely acknowledged in the typical blanket use of the term 'disaffected' and in outlining the causes of disaffection, Holroyd and Armour do little to quell this criticism of the use of the label 'disaffection'.

Much literature in the youth studies domain refers to either 'at-risk youth' or 'youth at risk'. However, there is a noticeable distinction amongst different theorists' definition and use of these terms. For instance, Bessant (2002) considers 'youth at risk' as typically signifying a young person at risk of unemployment. Presumably more recently in the UK the parallel concern might lead to a consideration of those at risk of being NEET. In the US, on the other hand, at risk seems to constitute those at risk of school failure or drop out (Franklin & Streeter, 1995).

For some sociologists 'youth at risk' refers to a larger transformation that can be located within Giddens' risk profile of modernity (e.g. Kelly, 2000). Thus for Kelly and other sociologists, 'youth at risk' refers to the crises, hazards and pressure in which all youth of our era are placed. Therefore it follows that all youth are 'at risk'. Given this assumption, several theorists propose different levels of at risk,

for example Freeland (1996) distinguishes between those who are 'gravely at risk' and the simply 'at risk'. While 'at risk of non-participation' could fit the participants of this study, there are so many risk factors, that even Beck himself has admitted that 'risk becomes another word for nobody knows' (1998, p. 12). The theorising on youth at risk therefore suggests that potentially, every behaviour and every group of young people can be imagined in terms of risk (Tait, 1995).

While the term 'at risk' may therefore seem too vague to use in practice, it is used, particularly in educational psychology research, typically to refer to the risk of permanent exclusion (Hardman, 2001). Likewise, te Riele (2006) notes that 'youth at risk' is the currently favoured label used in Australian policy for youth with poor educational outcomes, with an emphasis on the risk of not completing senior secondary education. However, policy identification of youth at risk has tended to simplistically focus on personal attributes of young people, rather than the interactions between individual and family circumstances, school and society recognised in research (Batten and Russell, 1995). te Riele (2006) sees that terms such as 'at risk' can label and pathologise students by focusing on individual deficiencies. She therefore prefers the term 'marginalised' arguing that:

Marginalized students are not identified through their personal characteristics, but through their relationship with (mainstream) schooling. In other words, marginalized students are those who are not served well by senior secondary schooling (te Riele, 2006, p. 140).

te Riele (2006) suggests that students' relationships with teachers are key to them feeling marginalised. Batten and Russell (1995) find that students feel marginalised when they are passive learners, have no choice in what and how to study and feel that teachers do not listen to them. However, Batten and Russell (1995) imply that this marginalisation leads to young people leaving or being excluded from mainstream schooling, whereas one might argue that the characteristics of marginalisation are both widespread amongst attending students and also unpredictable, with relationships varying across teachers and students (te Riele, 2004a). Nevertheless, while marginalisation places the blame away from the young person, its use and perceived association with

exclusion, means that the term is often used interchangeably with 'excluded' (e.g. Wishart, Taylor & Shultz, 2006).

Disadvantage is defined as deficit or disease, which for Colley and Hodkinson (2001) locates it within the individual and serves to undermine any acknowledgement of social and structural influences (cf. 'at risk' above). This might rule out the use of this term, however Reid (1999) considers that 'disadvantaged' suggests that the fault lies within society rather than the individual, although he believes the term 'socially excluded' is preferable as it is less accusatory.

While Reid (1999) considers 'socially excluded' a more useable term than 'disadvantaged', it was noted in the first chapter that social exclusion is also a term that may be defined in a multitude of ways and therefore risks misuse (Atkinson, 1998). MacDonald & Marsh (2002) regard the term 'as a general metaphor to refer to the range of socioeconomic problems which poor places and their residents *might face*' (p. 28 [original emphasis]). Therefore use of the term 'at risk of social exclusion' (e.g. SEU, 2004), is problematic, particularly given that unlike risk of exclusion from school, risk of social exclusion is largely out of a young person's control. Milbourne (2002a) brings together the terms socially excluded and marginalised, seeing that modern educational markets in the UK marginalise some students into alternative provision.

Young people ... perceive that the outcome of an endless struggle between home crises and poor school identity will offer little chance of social or economic mobility (Milbourne, 2002a, p. 333).

Milbourne also extends understanding of the consequences of marginalising young people, showing that alternative provision designed for marginalised students, can actually perpetuate the problem, leading to further marginalisation.

Thus far a critical discussion of the variety of terms that have been applied to young people who are not participating, or at risk of this, highlights that several terms imply blame lies with the individual, while other vocabulary, such as 'marginalisation', that does raise questions in terms of why young people might have negative experiences of education, are often associated with definite

outcomes like exclusion. Therefore this research uses the term 'hard to reach' to refer to the young people who were recruited to participate as it is a term that aims neither to assume blame, nor to assume the outcome of young people's varied experiences at the periphery of participation.

Brackertz (2007) notes that 'hard to reach' is sometimes used to describe those sections of the community that may not participate, whatever the context. While there is a lack of clarity about what is meant by 'hard to reach' (Evangelou & Boag-Munroe, 2009), it typically refers to hidden populations or minorities (Brackertz, 2007). There has been some criticism of the use of hard to reach outside of the academic literature, with suggestions that 'hard to reach', like other labels, implies homogeneity within distinct groups (Milbourne, 2002b). Flanagan (2010) believes it defines the problem as one within the group, rather than the approach used to reach them. I do not think this is the case; within education, where it is time and again argued that young people need to be reached (e.g. Maguire and Rennison, 2006), hard to reach implies recognition that assisting the individuals in question is difficult, but that it has been attempted.

Milbourne (2002b) recognises that hard to reach students are heterogenous, with individuals falling under the umbrella term representing 'diverse communities, cultures and language groups, and hold[ing] different values in relation to material and familial resources and roles' (p. 287). I therefore prefer the term to 'marginalised', which, when referring to educational circles, has the negative implication that young people have been disregarded by professionals. With these definitions in mind, 'hard to reach' therefore encompasses those who may have been marginalised, as well as those who themselves are disaffected, perhaps despite attempts at intervention.

This idea of disaffection was an issue that I grappled with in the research, in particular the idea that those who are most disaffected and marginalised would be difficult to find let alone interview. Curtis et al. (2004) note that 'children who communicate well, and in English, or who are regular school attendees, are more likely to be given a voice in the research literature' (*ibid.*, p.168). Perhaps, in the case of educational research, schools are less likely to volunteer hard to

reach participants, or these children are less willing or less able to participate, particularly in interview settings, which ‘makes a basic assumption that [participants] want to talk [and] can articulate their thoughts’ (Wise, 2001, p. 21).

The advantage of ‘hard to reach’ is that it shifts the blame away from the young person, while terms like ‘disaffected’ see the young person’s disposition to education at fault (Reid, 1999) and ‘marginalised’ suggests that prior labelling may have led the young person in question to be written off (cf. Willis, 1977). ‘Hard to reach’ is a non-pejorative term which encapsulates that the participants of this study may be difficult to engage with educationally and/or for research and that there is some implied persistence of this condition, that is, they will remain hard to reach without tailored intervention aimed at what makes it hard to reach these young people.

Compared to other terms, ‘hard to reach’ offers flexibility in terms of its use and the diversity of young people who may be labelled as such. Furthermore, the term is receiving more frequent use in the educational research and policy literature in this context (e.g. SESR, 2005; Barnardo’s, 2007; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007; CBI, 2008; Corney, 2009; Lawy et al., 2010). Still though I consider in chapter 3 how the recruitment of participants was carefully managed in order to avoid stigmatising the participants considered ‘hard to reach’.

## **2.2 Researching hard to reach young people**

In the first section of this literature review chapter I have highlighted the process of labelling that can be seen to apply to those young people who do not participate in education and training. I have provided a justification for using the term ‘hard to reach’ to refer to the participants in this study who were not considered to either be meeting their potential or likely to make a ‘positive’ post-16 progression. In the next section I consider some of the research that has sought to understand these young people. As I indicate below, much of the contemporary research has been focussed on young people in their post-16 careers rather than in school – where the emphasis has been on finding interventions for those at risk of non-participation.

## 2.2.1 Understanding NEETs and JWT

The majority of literature that focuses on the experience of NEETs is government funded research and evaluation reports (e.g. Hughes & Opie, 2008; Spielhofer et al., 2009). Little research published in peer reviewed academic journals has focused upon the NEET group. Maguire and Rennison (2005) do address young people in the NEET group in their study evaluating the piloting of the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA<sup>1</sup>).

Despite the introduction of EMA and various initiatives aimed at reducing the size of the NEET group, the impact has been limited in overcoming the increase in the size of the NEET group from 1997 to 2002 (Maguire & Rennison, 2005). Maguire and Rennison were able to consider the destinations of young people who were NEET at 16 two years later as part of the EMA evaluation. It had been anticipated that EMA might encourage some of these young people to re-engage with education, however, 'One-half of EMA-eligible young people ... who entered the NEET group at 16 occupied the same status two years later' (Maguire and Rennison, 2005, p.193). This conflicts with other evidence of the churn<sup>2</sup> of young people in and out of the NEET category (Sachdev, Harries & Roberts, 2006). Given that the introduction of EMA alone appears to have had little effect in re-engaging those already NEET, the initiatives mentioned in chapter 1, such as activity agreements, entry to employment and other work-focused learning were relied upon to tackle those already NEET (Corney, 2009); however, the majority of these programmes like EMA, have been lost to education budget cuts.

Payne (2002) reports that the reasons for becoming NEET can be complex. Poor academic achievement, poor school attendance, disadvantaged domestic arrangements and low socio-economic status can all be associated with becoming NEET (Payne, 2000). School experiences can also impact upon a

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<sup>1</sup> EMA is an allowance offered to young people from low income families who participate in Further Education, although this will no longer be available to those starting Further Education in 2011/2012.

<sup>2</sup> Sachdev et al. (2006) amongst others note that young people drift in and out of the NEET category. While some young people find permanent employment or go back to education, the 'churn' refers to a significant minority who engage in temporary employment and short courses that may bring them back to the NEET category on completion.

young person's likelihood of being in the NEET group, with young people who were excluded, truant or had suffered bullying being at an increased risk of becoming NEET (Payne, 2002). Furthermore Maguire and Rennison (2005) report that NEETs were more likely to have felt that their post-16 decision-making had been more difficult to make, compared with others who entered education, work or training. Later other authors published research with that pointed out the problem of determinism in the above argument (Yates & Payne, 2006). They argue that NEETs are not a homogenous group and that certain factors alone cannot predict whether a young person will become NEET.

Yates and Payne (2006) criticised the 'programme theories' (p. 330) used by Connexions when this service was responsible for careers-related information, advice and guidance (IAG) for 14-19 year olds. Yates and Payne provide evidence that their interventions led to those who are unable to work and those recently re-engaging receiving less attention, than those who can be targeted. This Yates and Payne liken to a fire-fighting approach, where the easier move into education, employment or training is given more emphasis than preventative work with those at risk of becoming NEET or work supporting young people who have recently taken up a place in education, employment or training.

Pemberton (2008) conducted research focussing upon the complex multiplicity of influences upon an individual's NEET status. Pemberton's broad case study also appreciates the cultural influences upon NEETs, recognising the inter-generational factors including, parents' education and values, social class, attainment and location. Pemberton found that living arrangements were a critical factor, finding an increased prevalence of 'sofa surfers', young people residing temporarily with friends. Aside from intergenerational factors, being 'hard to reach' was found to be a key influence on NEET status (cf. Rennison, Maguire, Middleton and Ashworth, 2005). For instance young people who were NEET were less likely to have accessed support at school. Pemberton's (2008) study shows that entering education, employment or training is more likely when young people have a stable family environment and positive parental support.

Although much of the contemporary research on young people not participating post-16 has focused on NEETs, there has also been a body of research that has been centred on those categorised as JWT, young people in work but who are not receiving formal training. Nonetheless, like NEETs, it is recognised that JWT is not a homogenous group (Spielhofer et al., 2009). Anderson et al. (2006) conducted a qualitative study of the experience of young people in JWT. They found that even though young people in JWT share many of the characteristics of those who are NEET, they have fewer barriers to engagement, and JWTs are considered more similar to those participating in education and training. Despite this, there is evidence of much movement between JWT and NEET. Evidence from the Department for Children, Schools and Families<sup>1</sup> has shown that almost half of those exiting either JWT or NEET move into the other group (Spielhofer et al., 2007). Anderson et al.'s (2006) study was unable to capture this fluidity as participants were interviewed on only one occasion. More recent studies have incorporated a longitudinal element; Quinn, Lawy and Diment (2008) finding that many of the young people in their study moved in and out of the JWT category. Changes ranged from those JWT who became NEET to those who embarked on accredited training.

Recent research investigating the experience of young people in JWT does not support Anderson et al.'s (2006) supposition that JWT are more similar to those participating in education and training than to NEETs (Maguire, Huddleston, Thompson & Hirst, 2008; Quinn et al., 2008). Both 2008 studies hold in common exploratory methods to capture the experience of JWT and unlike the majority of research on those young people who do not participate, each has led to published academic papers (e.g. Lawy, Quinn & Diment, 2009; Maguire, 2010).

Quinn et al. (2008) responded to the need to know more about the lives, job and priorities of JWT young people. The research was the first large scale longitudinal qualitative study completed on young people in JWT. The overall recommendation of the research was the need to reconceptualise JWT away

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<sup>1</sup> The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) was a department of the UK government between 2007 and 2010, responsible for education and other issues affecting children and young people in England. The DCSF was replaced by the Department for Education after the change of government in 2010.

from its current deficit category. The longitudinal element of the research allowed investigation of the fluidity and range of activities engaged in. Spielhofer et al.'s (2009) three types of JWT (sustained in a JWT; at risk of becoming NEET; and transitional in a JWT), do not adequately capture the range of reasons for JWT found, from day jobs to career building.

Quinn et al. (2008) revealed the structural issues faced by JWT young people, including negative experiences of schooling and low status, gendered jobs with little job security. Like young people who are NEET, JWT sometimes face a range of personal problems including poverty and family breakdown. They are aware of the negative connotation of their position, but they see themselves as survivors not losers. Therefore labelling cannot be used to explain their experiences. Quinn et al. (2008) used Connexions Personal Advisors to recruit and interview the young people. Despite the access to the target population, reaching the young people, particularly for subsequent interviews proved difficult, although more successful for face to face interviews rather than by telephone. This is of relevance for the current research, nevertheless 182 interviews were conducted, 15 of which were face to face.

Maguire et al. (2008) were researching JWT at a similar point in time, with comparable research questions. They did not adopt a longitudinal design and as such the research cannot address the changes in destinations that JWT young people may have experienced, although the researchers did find that a significant number of the young people thought to be JWT, were not in this category when contacted. Maguire et al. (2008) compared two case study areas, therefore allowing comparisons in terms of differences in opportunities to join family businesses and transport availability between the two areas. 36 interviews were conducted, although 950 telephone calls to young people were necessary in order to gain this sample size.

Maguire et al. (2008) conclude that negative school experiences were a major contributor to young people's move into JWT after school. However, the authors did find support for Anderson et al. (2006) in that the JWT sample differed from NEETs, with JWT more likely to complete Year 11 and attain qualifications. Maguire et al. (2008) found a wide diversity among exam results

and other JWT school outcomes, including participants' disposition toward school. Again this points to the heterogeneity of this policy label (cf. Lawy et al., 2009).

Maguire et al. (2008) report that their participants were likely to view their jobs in terms of more than just financial gain. The majority valued the informal training they received and the experience gained from work. They did not perceive the lack of accredited training as a disadvantage. The young people showed evidence of changes to their self-identity, in particular the changes in self-image they derived from learning and utilising skills (see Weil, 1986). In turn, their employers and parents, who were also interviewed, did not perceive them as 'failures', but as holding the potential to build upon their skills and abilities through the training they received. A key difference between Maguire et al. (2008) and Quinn et al. (2008) seems to be that Maguire et al.'s young people more often recognised that they received training, even though it was not accredited. On the other hand, Quinn et al.'s (2008) longitudinal design was able to show the fluidity and churn amongst young people in JWT.

The research that has investigated the experience of young people in NEET and JWT post-16 destinations often recognises that these young people who do not participate are 'hard to reach' in the sense that they are difficult to engage in research. The current study seeks to understand 'hard to reach' young people who may be at risk of moving into these destinations, given the unrealistic principle that both of these policy labels ought not exist once young people must participate to 18 years of age in 2015 (Fletcher et al., 2007).

### **2.2.2 McIntosh & Houghton – Disengagement measured quantitatively**

McIntosh and Houghton (2005) investigated disengagement from secondary school quantitatively. The authors aimed to tell a continuous story of those young people who were disengaged from education as they moved from school, into FE and onto their working lives. McIntosh and Houghton (2005) only include those who disengage due to disaffection with education or learning and not those who disengage for other reasons such as family problems or caring

duties. This sampling decision appears arbitrary and does not fit in with academic educational research where pressures outside of education have been shown to impact disengagement (e.g. Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2001) and likewise disengagement is found to be impacted by a multitude of factors including family background (te Riele, 2006). McIntosh and Houghton do not acknowledge any of the potential problems of using disengagement as a label highlighted in the previous section.

The study used existing large national datasets, aiming primarily to investigate how much could be learnt about disengagement using the Youth Cohort Study. They consider characteristics of those who disengage and also consider the effects of re-engagement in FE. However, the study as a whole is fragmented as National Pupil Database (NPD) and Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) data is used to investigate underachievement, the Youth Cohort Study is used to investigate disengagement and the Labour Force Survey is used to investigate vocational education and labour market outcomes. As such the three key variables in McIntosh and Houghton's study cannot be analysed against one another. McIntosh and Houghton ought not to claim that they have told a continuous story for the young people in the study, after all despite the data sets covering a wide age range, no longitudinal analysis is possible. Their recommendation of the need for more birth cohort data sets that would allow analysis of the same individual over time capturing amongst others, the key variables of this study, is however worth noting.

One of the problems of the study is that truancy is used as the key measure of disengagement. This is the only available option within the Youth Cohort Study. McIntosh and Houghton have to rely on one question in this particular cross panel study, asking respondents whether they had played truant during the final year of compulsory schooling, and if so, how frequently. This is of course very narrow and focuses only upon attendance in the final year of schooling, limiting the heterogeneity of disaffection seen in the study. It also calls into question why McIntosh and Houghton believe that they are measuring disengagement caused by disaffection. These labels are generally considered both wider and more pervasive than truancy. While truancy can be considered an outcome of disengagement (Holroyd & Armour, 2003), to assume that all truancy is

underpinned by disaffection is naïve. After all, O’Keefe (1994) found that truancy could be limited to particular disliked subjects rather than indicative of disengagement across the board, while Cullingford and Morrison (1997) report the link between peer pressure and truancy amongst other deviant behaviours. Of course the use of this measure reveals that McIntosh and Houghton could not actually exclude those who disengage for reasons other than disaffection, making their careful definition of disengagement redundant for this study.

Using self-reported truancy as a proxy for disengagement, relies both on the honesty of young people completing the Youth Cohort Survey and their understanding of the definition of truancy. Their findings in terms of who reports greater levels of truancy conflicts with other data. In the Youth Cohort Study, girls report greater truancy, which the authors note may reflect their honesty and therefore a bias in the data, given that boys typically hold lower attendance records as measured elsewhere. Finally, use of a quantitative dataset restricts an understanding of why these young people play truant. Here McIntosh and Houghton control for various background characteristics such as family background, but there can be no indication of why individuals truant or appreciation that children truant for varied reasons (e.g. Attwood & Croll, 2006). McIntosh and Houghton (2005) admit that ‘truancy is not an ideal measure of disaffected disengagement’ (p. 12), but still claim some validity of the measure given that they consider their results plausible.

Unsurprisingly, McIntosh and Houghton (2006) found that those who disengage, measured according to truancy, achieve less well in their GCSE qualifications and are less likely to engage in FE and more likely to be unemployed post-16 than those who do not truant. For those former truants who do engage in FE, typically vocational qualifications are pursued and the analysis therefore focuses on those pursuing this FE destination. While former truants with low GCSE grades are found to be unlikely to achieve academic qualifications in FE, they can be expected to achieve Level 2 vocational qualifications if their GCSE qualifications were not very low. Given the focus on disengagement, it is perhaps surprising that the focus is upon participants who have disengaged from school and go onto FE, and upon labour market outcomes, when many

disengaged students at secondary school do not continue into FE or find jobs post-16 (Dryfoos, 1994; Long & Sanderson, 2001; MacDonald & Marsh, 2001).

McIntosh and Houghton use the Labour Force Survey to investigate the impact of these vocational qualifications on labour market outcomes. However, the Labour Force Survey cannot be matched with the Youth Cohort Study and does not capture data on truancy. McIntosh and Houghton choose to use low school qualifications as an indicator of those who would have been disengaged. While, they find that for 'unqualified school-leavers, the acquisition of vocational qualifications is strongly associated with higher employment rates' (p. 7) and that this impacts wages only for those who leave school without qualifications, no conclusions ought to be drawn in terms of the benefit to employment prospects of disengaged students participating in FE, since the less than satisfactory surrogate for disengagement of truancy could not even be used here.

### **2.2.3 Atkins – Case study of vocational FE learners**

McIntosh and Houghton's (2005) study does not fulfil its promise of telling 'a continuous story of those who have disengaged from the education process, from their time at school, through further education and into their working lives' (p. 1). As such one must turn to research with a smaller group of individuals in order to understand 'individuals' circumstances, their thoughts and their reasoning for potentially or actually disengaging from education' (ibid, p. 10) and ultimately to understand the experience of this type of young person at this time in their lives. Atkins (2009) uses a participative case study approach, presenting data in a narrative form in order to tell the story of 29 individuals pursuing low level vocational programmes at FE Colleges. While the method contrasts McIntosh and Houghton (2005), Atkins (2009) also promises a story and focuses on young people on low level vocational FE programmes, which McIntosh and Houghton implied were likely destinations for the majority of disengaged young people.

Atkins (2009) did not just collect narrative data from interviews with young people; professionals were interviewed, classroom observations undertaken, written data provided by the participants, as well as the inclusion of some documentary evidence. Atkins (2009) focused on three separate groups of Level 1 and Foundation Stage learners across two geographically distant FE Colleges. The Colleges also differed in the relative deprivation of the areas they serve; however, there are similarities in terms of courses offered and a culture of these types of students being problematised in both organisations. The 'stories' of each group are given separately, but the interpretation is given as a whole thereafter. Atkins (2009) reports a contradiction between the students who enjoyed attending College, their aspirations, dreams of affluence and celebrity, and their high hopes for progression, despite low levels of achievement. Leisure activities held primary importance for participants which often outweighed the investment they made in their learning. The Health and Social Care students in particular spoke of leaving college if employment presented itself.

Atkins (2009) noted that the young people revealed 'fantasy futures' (ibid, p. 119) By 'fantasy future' Atkins refers to the dreams and aspirations young people held for their lives beyond college. Often these fantasy futures involved desire for fame and money. Atkins compared this to Ball et al.'s (2000) theorising on imagined futures which was more nuanced since they were able to draw upon longitudinal narratives and therefore investigate how participants' fantasy futures changed over time.

Given the that data was collected at colleges, any stories of drop out or disaffection were not captured. Instead a collective narrative is given; individual differences were only interrogated in terms of class, culture and gender. A longitudinal analysis would have strengthened Atkins' research. By following these students she could have investigated whether the anticipated progression and fantasy futures the young people held came to fruition. Data captured before and after the point of this research would allow consideration of both the experiences these young people bring to their lower level vocational programmes and where the programmes lead. Furthermore, particular hard to

reach young people could be involved if longitudinal analysis allowed the stories of those who dropped out of these programmes to be considered.

Perhaps the voice of the young people generally heard in Atkins (2009) is not in fact indicative of the 'reality of these young lives' (p. 8), but a more diluted consensus of those involved. While Atkins (2009) states that the young people are quoted verbatim in many places, this is not the case even in the descriptive narrative chapters, while other research reviewed below offers more of young people's voice (e.g. Willis, 1977; Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1999; Ball et al., 2000), as do several journal articles cited that, like Atkins, combine narrative and interpretation (e.g. Lawy, 2002; MacDonald & Marsh, 2002; Attwood, Croll & Hamilton, 2003).

In a similar way to MacDonald and Marsh (2001), who tell the story of young people who live in a socially excluded area, Atkins (2009) tells the story of young people pursuing lower level qualifications. While it can be assumed that each study includes hard to reach young people, we cannot assume that all participants in these situations have homogenous backgrounds, are necessarily disadvantaged or have been marginalised. For instance Atkins (2009) reports that the majority of participants reported they chose their course and were positive about the benefits of achieving a good qualification, suggesting that harder to reach participants might be located outside of the study. Indeed, only those attending college could participate. This does suggest a gap to be filled by research that recruits individuals on the basis of being hard to reach, rather than recruiting groups that may become hard to reach.

### **2.3 Researching the post-16 transition**

The third part of this chapter focuses upon the extended period of time around the end of compulsory schooling. I review post-16 transition literature, starting with a critique of the notion of 'transition' itself. Once transition and other related terms have been defined, I select several key studies of the post-16 transition to review, elucidating a number of theoretical frameworks that authors have used to understand the post-16 transitions of young people.

### 2.3.1 Researching transitions

Transition has been defined as a 'discontinuity in a person's life space' (Adams, Hayes, & Hopson, 1976, p. 5). While few would argue against such a definition, it can certainly be elaborated. Gallacher and Cleary (2007) apply the definition to education, considering a 'personal transition between two states of 'being' – the before and after of specified learning experiences' (2007, p.1). Researchers agree that transition is not the same as 'movement' or 'transfer', although it involves both (Ecclestone, 2007). Transition depicts change and shifts in identity and agency as people progress. According to Ecclestone (2007), the most popular conception of transition in research is as processes of 'becoming somebody' with turning points, rites of passage, and periods of routine.

The concept of transition is often located within life stories as an event or turning point (Strauss, 1962), where the actor is seen to move from one role or status to another: infant to adolescent, pupil to worker, employee to retiree. While this has uses in making sense of certain defined movements, it limits the complexity of experience by focusing on single events (Bauman, 2000, p.2).

For Stokes and Wyn (2007) transition relates to the transitional stage between childhood and adulthood. Others challenge the depiction of transition as a rite of passage, movement through life stages, 'crisis event', 'critical incident' or life change rooted in theories of discernible processes of 'typical' adult maturation (Hughes, 2002). Furthermore life can be seen as in perpetual transition; or as Quinn (2006) has argued we are all permanently lost in transition and flux.

Stokes and Wyn (2007) recognise a renewed interest in youth transitions during the 1980s when the youth labour market collapsed and a direct transition from school to work ceased to be the norm for young people. However, Stokes and Wyn (2007) feel that more modern and complex transitions are typically compared to previous normative transitional patterns, which leads to 'mainly negative, assessments of contemporary youth transitions' (p. 497). For instance, young people's development is seen as arrested (Coté, 2000), or they are seen as lost in transition (Howe and Strauss, 2000).

In the UK-based literature, transitions are characterised as both accelerated (Bynner, 2005) and extended (Jones & Wallace, 1992) leading to the designation of a pre-adult status often referred to as post-adolescence (Ball, et al., 2000). However, Lynch and Field (2007) report that education can be as much about immobility, as it is movement. Therefore, conceiving transition as only implying progression or development would be naïve. Transitions are relational and multi-faceted, rather than fixed and linear, and research ought to consider the barriers to choice experienced by individuals in transition (Glastra, Hake & Schedler 2004).

The above discussion implies that youth transitions are complex, but an important field for further study. Nevertheless youth transition research as a field has been criticised. Jeffs and Smith (1998) argued against the use of the term transition; while Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) believe that transitions studies marginalise young people's own accounts of their lives and their active, cultural role in that process. Miles (2000) similarly suggested that quantitative, empiricist and policy driven mappings of school-to-work transitions have taken precedence over more enlightening ethnographic and theoretically-driven studies of youth identities. Stokes & Wyn (2007) argue that transition offers a limited and outmoded conceptual frame for understanding young people's engagement with work and learning. They are critical of transition research, which often focuses on outcomes, rather than the process of identity development. However, this argument fails to acknowledge the research in the last decade that has considered identity change as part of the post-16 transition (e.g. Raffo & Reeves, 2000; Cassidy & Trew, 2001; Lawy, 2002b).

Conceiving of the post-16 transition as a fixed point in linear development is predicated on antiquated assumptions about identity as a series of developmental stages (Marcia, 1966). The de-standardisation and increasing non-linearity of youth transitions (Ecclestone, 2007) points to the continuing need to understand the diversity of young people's experiences at the end of secondary schooling where it is assumed young people's trajectories strike different paths (Evans & Furlong, 1997).

Miles (2000) also raises several criticisms of transition research. He argues that sociologists on one hand exaggerate the impact of structural influences on young people's everyday lives, but also considers a bias of research to consider melodramatic patterns of inequality. Miles' argument that most youth have straightforward transitions is strongly refuted by research findings (e.g. Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1997, 1999; Macrae et al., 1999). Miles (2000) concludes a need for research that captures how young people negotiate structures to either reach independence or not. Bates and Riseborough (1993) had already explored the ways in which class, identity and young people's agency contribute to their educational and working careers. But what was missing from that work was a longitudinal perspective, appreciating how young people change over time.

MacDonald et al. (2001) point out that much of the critique of the study of youth transitions is misconceived and that this perspective remains a fruitful one so long as the overarching recommendation is upheld, to prioritise the actual views, experiences, interests and perspectives of young people (Miles, 2000), while serving the articulated needs that are revealed (Williamson, 1997) but are often ignored (Lawy et al., 2009). This implies studying youth transitions in authentic settings, addressing the complexity and protraction of young people's experiences and theorising the interrelationships between individual dispositions and agency, and institutional and structural contexts (Colley et al., 2003).

The above commentary indicates that the field of youth transition is on one hand contested, yet there is the need to understand young people as they experience the longer, non-linear and less certain post-16 transitions that are now typical of their trajectory at the end of compulsory schooling. The next sections of this literature review focus upon five seminal studies of the post-16 transition. They have been selected amongst other potential choices to illustrate how research understanding of the field has developed chronologically, while the review of each study shows the wide theoretical framework under which the post-16 transition can be understood.

### **2.3.2 Ashton and Field – Careers**

The field of youth transition research can be delineated according to the era in which young people experienced their transitions. Goodwin & O'Connor (2007) split the literature on the transition from school to work into two parts. First, there is the literature based on studies conducted before the late 1970s (e.g. Wilson 1957; Carter 1963; Ashton and Field 1976). This post-war period up to the mid 1970s is referred to as a 'golden age' (Goodwin & O'Connor, 2007, p. 557) for school to work transitions with the studies revealing how young people made smooth, linear and uncomplicated transitions from school to work.

Arguably the most well known example of research during this period is Ashton and Field's (1976) work. Ashton and Field's theorising was based on extensive interviews conducted across a wide spectrum of young workers, as well as reviews of related literature. Ashton and Field provided evidence that challenged the then prevailing view of the transition from school to work as strain, tension and trauma. They also considered the inability of previous literature to account for the desire with which some young people enter 'dead-end jobs' (Ashton & Field, 1976, p. 12).

Ashton and Field (1976) identified three groups of young people at transition: the careerless, the short-term careers and the extended careers, with each group holding different experiences and identities. The careerless entered semi-skilled and unskilled work, after lower school streaming, and experienced relatively smooth transitions on the whole. Their concern was for the immediate present, content to work in jobs that provided good short-term economic rewards but limited future prospects. This group had low levels of commitment and tired easily so frequently changed jobs. However, in this golden era (Goodwin & O'Connor, 2007), such transition between jobs was commonplace and achievable.

Those in the short-term careers category were mainly from respectable working class families who had experienced moderate academic success at school and were characterised as knowing their place between the lower streams and the higher streams and grammar schools. These young people worked towards the

short-term reward of qualification and personal achievement. They sought jobs that offered the chance for development and therefore often training. They would consider taking lower initial earnings if the long-term prospects were good. On one hand these young people often became locked into their chosen occupation due to their developing job-related skills, but once qualified from training, other interests and other related jobs might become more desirable.

Young people with extended careers consisted of both middle class and upwardly mobile working class youth. These young people occupied Grammar school and higher stream places at school. Ashton and Field (1976) suggested that only these young people have been brought up in a culture that believed school success brings a good career. For them self-discipline and hard work were seen as important and as such the focus was often on long-term rewards; with the present experienced as preparation for their long-term future. The self image of those with extended careers was both shaped by their present occupation and potential achievements. Their career paths offered continuous advancement and high, secure incomes. However, the drawback was the need for these young people to subordinate their other interests in relation to their work.

The three categories identified by Ashton and Field (1976) suggest an unsophisticated picture of the transition process based on family, class and school experiences, with young workers destined for certain avenues of the labour market in smooth and unproblematic ways. Ashton and Field (1976) themselves do acknowledge in their sixth chapter that they have presented a simplified and static picture of young people in transition in the 1960s. They note gender differences, although these are explained only through prevailing gender roles. While young people are typecast according to structure and seemingly not offered much, if any, agency, several more recent studies find some resonance in the three broad groups identified by Ashton and Field (e.g. Roberts, 1993; Furlong et al., 2005; Lawy et al., 2009).

However, Goodwin and O'Connor (2007) found that many young people in Elias's (2000) study from the 1960s only fitted one of Ashton and Field's three groups at the start of their working lives. Ashton and Field's linear and highly

differentiated paths for these individuals did not develop as predicted for Elias's sample. The transitions for all three groups were characterised by greater levels of individual complexity and insecurity which could not be explained fully by family background, class or educational achievement. Goodwin and O'Connor (2007) found that many individuals diverged from their predicted path soon after their first interview just after leaving school. As such, longitudinal data collection may have altered Ashton and Field's (1976) theorising.

Ashton and Field's (1976) work has been criticised for its simplicity (Jefferson, 1979) and its inherent determinism related to class and academic success. Jefferson (1979) suggested that Ashton and Field may not converge with the view of transition as stressful because they assume a deductive approach, stemming from participant background. Methodologically, Ashton and Field's work may be criticised as very little detail is given about the young people who provide the evidence for their theory. The discussion is infrequently related to the interviews with young people and quotes are not used. Four case studies are provided in appendices; this perhaps serves only to relegate the voice of the young people further.

Some points made by Ashton and Field appear to reveal parallels with modern transitions. Firstly, work opportunities for young people are restricted to geographical areas. Careerless young people were often considered failures at school and three types of learner were identified: failures who tried to keep their heads down; those who broke rules to pass monotony; and those who openly rejected school. This may bear relevance to discourses on disengagement today. In the 1960s lower stream schooling was a barrier to apprenticeships, meaning this was not a destination for the careerless. 40% of the young people enter the same occupation channel as their parents and many more find jobs through other family and friends, suggesting the reproduction of social class over generations.

Ashton and Field (1976) classify young people according to career and provide an early example of a more contemporary view of career extending beyond one's current occupation. Indeed, Stokes and Wyn's (2007) participants born over forty years later reflect a definition of career 'woven together by narratives

about present and future occupations' (p. 508). Indeed, Stokes and Wyn's younger participants pursuing careers in creative industries fit well with the extended career label espoused by Ashton and Field (1976). However, conceptions of career have advanced since their research. Career is not necessarily constrained to labour, as other research considers for instance young people's leisure careers (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2006), risk careers (Lawy, 2002b), criminal careers (MacDonald & Marsh, 2002) and drug using careers (Shildrick, 2006). A key debate amongst transition research revolves around the relative structure and agency of young people's career decision making (Bloomer, 2001). For instance Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) draw upon Bourdieu (1993) in their theory of careership, which combines elements of pragmatic rational decision-making, the influence of others and transformations.

Finally, Ashton and Field (1976) draw together a range of fields and sources to understand and enlighten transitions from school to work. While careerless young people were said to recognise their destiny of semi and unskilled jobs, Ashton and Field do defend the careerless, arguing that they should not be seen as 'thick, lazy and indifferent' (1976, p134). The careerless still have potential to fulfil and socialising at work is both important to them and something that they should prepare for.

### **2.3.3 Willis – Working class lads**

Willis's (1977) often cited study was an ethnographic observation focused on a group of working class white male students. Willis studied the choices and culture that led a group of working class schoolboys into working class jobs, challenging the assumption that they have no choice. Willis followed this cohort through their final school days and into the variety of working class jobs that they readily and willingly took up. Again this study is set in advance of the rise of youth unemployment in the UK, thus despite their open rejection of school, the participants, or 'Lads' as they were referred to in the text, were legitimately able to reject middle class careers and embrace 'dead-end manual labouring jobs' (Jefferson, 1979, p. 528). Willis reveals the experience of these young

people, but in doing so challenges naïve deterministic or class reproduction explanations.

Willis does not assume 'that cultural forms are determined in some way as an automatic reflex by macro determinations such as class location, religion and educational background' (1977, p. 171). However, the Lads could be seen to be replicating social and economic structures by rejecting schooling and seeking the same type of work as the careerless in Ashton and Field (1976), resigning themselves to reproduce their working class background (Cashmore, 1984). However, they were reportedly happy to find such work which was fairly stable and reasonably paid. But, Willis goes further than Ashton and Field, focussing on the experience of transition for this group of participants and particularly upon the Lads' oppositional culture. They were opposed to their schooling, preferring instead to be 'having a laff' (Willis, 1977, p. 14). The Lads were also opposed to other cultures amongst their and other student communities. The Lads refer critically to 'ear'oles', those that are committed to education, conformist groups that Willis uses as comparative case studies.

The Lads would be considered 'hard to reach' in light of discussions earlier in this chapter. Willis (1977) does not find these young people trying to keep their heads down or passing the time as Ashton and Field (1976) suggested. They openly rejected the school and were notorious, bullying pupils on racial grounds and subjecting females to sexual abuse on the playground. They were in direct opposition to school staff who they tend to perceive as the enemy (Willis, 1977). For the Lads, school was merely the delay until they could enter the real world of wages and sexual adventures outside the school gates (Bynner, 2001). The lads held what Rees, Fevre, Furlong and Gorard (2007) would consider 'negative school identities', although such issues of identity were not considered by Willis. Although, as was suggested by Ashton and Field (1976), teachers could be seen to actively reinforce the Lads' identities, but beyond this teachers also determined which boys held potential to change, and which should be written off (Bynner, 2001), which can be interpreted through the discussion of labelling in education above.

Willis provides a detailed case study, using observation and interviews with the young people, as well as interviewing significant others including teachers, parents and, once in employment, managers. Willis (1977) studied twelve 'young non-academic disaffected males' (p. 2), but this is not expanded upon. The reader does not know how they were selected, or what previous behaviour constituted the Lads being deemed as counter-school. Furthermore, one might criticise the focus on the Lads as an entity in themselves, rather than as individuals. This is perpetuated both in the selection of an already close knit friendship group, presumably amenable to ethnographic study, and in the comparison of the Lads to other conformist and non-conformist groups at the same and other schools. For instance Willis does not explore links between the culture of non-conformity at Hammertown Boys (the Lads' school) and other non-conformists at other schools in comparison cases. Thus, the group were specific and not necessarily representative of other non-conformists, including any without large established friendship groups within the school.

One might question the assertions Willis made about working class culture on the basis of one, largely interconnected, group. Furthermore, Tait (1993) claims that sub-cultural theories such as Willis' are inadequate, for they are essentially normative, failing to acknowledge the potential for individual differences in the transitions of similar young people (Lawy, 2002a). Indeed, there has been much individualisation of problematic youth in recent research (e.g. Lloyd, 2006). But oppositional school culture can be lost in the individual case. Perhaps disaffected youth may operate as individuals against the system, still though any cultural influences ought to be explored, as Willis (1977) has done.

The Lads are presented as having choice and agency. This might appear to avoid a limitation of Ashton and Field (1976), but the Lads are presented as having more choice than the 'ear'oles' who are dependent on qualifications and conform; this may be misguided given the wider cultural capital<sup>1</sup> that the 'ear'oles' would be assumed to hold (Ball et al., 1999). Willis interviewed important others, such as parents and school practitioners. While this may risk an elitist bias, there is little evidence of Willis swaying from the voice of the

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<sup>1</sup> The role that distinctive kinds of culture play in relation to the processes of class formations in contemporary societies (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

Lads. On the other hand having spoken to parents, Willis (1977) fails to report the extent to which the Lads' transitions directly reproduce those of the previous generation.

While at school the Lads represented a working class counter-school culture, which it is argued leads to a transformation that reproduces aspects of the larger working class culture and directs them to openly accept manual labour (Willis, 1977). Willis did observe the Lads at work and talk to colleagues and managers there, but did not follow these participants much further into their post-school lives. One might argue that the initial phase at work might show more conformity, but that the non-conformist attitudes of school could return over time. Ashton and Field (1976) on the other hand did interview young people into their twenties in order to ascertain how they persisted in and out of employment.

Willis (1977) considered that part of the reason that the working class lads moved into working class jobs was that the lads embraced the culture of masculinity working in a factory. Of course Willis only studied the lads in detail. Yet subsequent analyses have considered gender and identity in the post-16 transition (e.g. Wallace, 1987; Macrae & Maguire, 1999; McDowell, 2003; Atkins, 2009), in particular the crisis of masculinity (Mac an Ghail, 1994). Wallace (1987) found that only a small minority of her participants shared similar positive beliefs about factory work, finding that 80% of school leavers, albeit not a disaffected cohort, considered factory work the job they would least like to do.

Willis' (1977) work is criticised in the literature for two main reasons. In presenting an ethnographic study of a subculture and, indeed, a specific group of working class lads, Willis is criticised for presenting what over time has come to be recognised as a simplistic theorisation of working class educational orientations (Brown, 1987). More so than Ashton and Field (1976), Willis fails to consider social mobility or barriers thereof. However, Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) report that the ethnographic description of school disaffection still bears relevance to disaffection today. Others criticise Willis for championing the Lads,

presenting them as lovable rogues, rather than problematic youth opposed to authority, abusive and not adverse to breaking laws (Lloyd, 2006).

Roberts (1993) recognises that while Willis' Lads took up the jobs that they were reported to desire, these jobs would have more likely been taken up by adults just a few years later, given that the youth labour market began to collapse in 1975 (Goodwin & O'Connor, 2007). More recent studies typically focus on young people's experience of training schemes, unemployment and the more troubled transitions young people then faced (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Indeed, Willis (Willis, Bekenn, Ellis & Whitt, 1988) himself noted that unemployment in the early 1980's UK affected the traditional transition from school to the labour market such that the Lads' transition to unskilled manufacturing work with relatively good rates of pay would be largely unthinkable less than ten years later (McDowell, 2003).

Willis' study does bridge the gap between research investigating the post-16 transition and hard to reach young people. By all accounts the Lads appeared to be hard to reach at school. However, the research is now dated, particularly as the normative transition from school to work at 16 became obsolete from the late 70s onwards. The research also focused on the story of the group of lads, rather than comparing individual differences in their experiences.

#### **2.3.4 Bloomer and Hodkinson – Transition from school to FE**

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999) conducted the most comprehensive study of the post-16 transition for young people intending to continue into Further Education (FE)<sup>1</sup>. The research is representative of modern post-16 transitions which are unlikely to involve transfer from school to work at 16 (Roberts, 1993). Furthermore their study differs to those previously reviewed in three important ways. The study was longitudinal, interviewing participants over four years pre- and post-transition. Secondly the focus is on the individual rather than the ethnographic focus of an observed group. Finally the research focuses on

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<sup>1</sup> 85% of young people stay on in Further Education at the end of compulsory schooling (DfE, 2010a)

learning; this might have limited the scope of the study, but nonetheless a comprehensive account is given of the educational transition from school to FE.

A total of 289 interviews were conducted during the course of the project. 79 Year 11s<sup>1</sup> were initially included who had clear intentions to study at the colleges participating in the study. Participants were selected on the basis of interesting cases. After the initial round of interviews, the sample was reduced from 79 to 49 on account of the theoretical relevance of cases to the research. The majority of the 49 participants took part in five or six semi-structured interviews, once in Year 11 and sporadically post-16 until Year 14, the third year post-16, when some participants had commenced Higher Education. 16 teachers, tutors and parents were also interviewed, although given the focus on individual cases it is questionable as to how representative these 'other' interviews would have been. A wide range of supplementary information was collected from the colleges and schools involved. This is not noticeable within the analysis, therefore it does not cloud the participants' verbatim voice which is placed on centre stage during the analysis. Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) also considered the interactional relationship between institutional culture and individual student's learning careers. However, the authors chose colleges that they were familiar with to participate, perhaps affecting the lens through which this institutional culture is viewed (Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2000).

In Year 11 few participants had any clear understanding of the ways in which FE would differ from school; post-16 though, the vast majority were enthusiastic about their FE. Over half of the sample had changed their intended courses between their first interview in school and their first term in college; contrasting quantitative research which finds that the majority of young people remain in the destination they chose (Ireland & O'Donnell, 2004). Decisions were rarely shaped by specific career interests, many approaching FE with a view to keeping their options open. Any career intentions participants did have seemed to be liable to change (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997).

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999) use two definitions drawn from previous research in their analysis. By 'learning career', Bloomer (1997) characterised

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<sup>1</sup> Final year of secondary schooling.

the ways in which dispositions to learning and career blend with a wide range of other influences as part of a person's identity. 'Career' here indicates that these combined dispositions change over time. Three types of learning career are arbitrarily distinguished, although transformations and choices were not predictable (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997). Some students showed little or no change; others appeared to have undergone sudden transformations; and a third group appeared to be experiencing gradual change (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997). This cannot be compared to Ashton and Field's three career types, given the different use of the term career in these studies. Yet these classifications of learning careers in transition enabled an exploration of how class, identity and agency contributed to careers which changed over time unlike previous research (e.g. Bates & Riseborough, 1993).

In using the term 'disposition', Bloomer and Hodkinson draw upon Bourdieu (1977) who argued that individuals act in ways made possible by existing dispositions to the world. Such dispositions are combined as habitus, the interpenetration of structures, traditions and perceptions as a system of dispositions or strategy-generating principles (Hodkinson et al., 1996). Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) found that the young people's dispositions related to their nature of knowledge. Another general pattern concerns the importance of economic, social and, in particular, cultural capital (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) in young people's learning careers. Several years later, Colley et al. (2003), who studied vocational FE exclusively, extended this theorising. They forwarded vocational habitus as a term acknowledging how students pursuing learning towards a trade orientate themselves towards the career they perceive, while various fields predispose them for this vocational culture.

This theorising contrasts with the more common view of career as a predictable, linear progression through occupations (Armstrong, 1987). It also goes beyond traditional theories of careership such as trait theory (see Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997), developmental theories (e.g. Ginsberg et al., 1951) and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). 'Career', according to Bloomer and Hodkinson is interspersed with turning points (Strauss, 1962), or transformations (Hodkinson et al., 1996). The post-16 transition is a structural turning point, but is associated with non-structural transformations like changes in friends and

teachers (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999). Therefore this appreciation of multi-faceted transitions fits with the more contemporary view of the field delineated by Stokes and Wyn (2007).

In terms of decision making, Bloomer and Hodkinson conferred with Hodkinson (1995) who, rather than assume that young people's decisions were technical rational as seen in much policy (Bennet et al., 1992), described a complex pragmatically rational decision making by young people. This is supported more recently by Lawy (2002b) whose participants revealed pragmatic career decision-making influenced by their socio-economic backgrounds and experiences, rather than 'in a mechanistic and dehumanised fashion against some pre-given, external and fixed criteria' (p. 421). Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) also revealed that this pragmatism could lead young people to take quite different pathways towards relatively similar goals (job security, balance in life and fulfilment).

Studentship is another term Bloomer and Hodkinson used to theorise the post-16 transition referring to the processes by which students construct their learning careers (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Bloomer and Hodkinson found that the majority of participants conformed to what teachers expected. Some showed strategic compliance, 'going through the motions, but with no shared commitment' (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997, p. 12). Four types of studentship are given, tactical responses to learning, which might overestimate the thought young people give to their disposition to learning.

Despite the obvious focus on students given the FE destination and interest in changes in learning over time, Bloomer and Hodkinson were able to capture the experience of those who dropped out of FE (Hodkinson & Bloomer, 2001). Other studies of dropping out are typically retrospective (e.g. Stone et al., 2000), whereas Bloomer and Hodkinson captured the various trajectories and various times which young people withdrew from education. Hodkinson and Bloomer (2001) reported that 'the causes of dropping out are located both inside and outside educational institutions' (p. 133). Dropping out was shown to be a response to particular, often difficult, situations.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) write about 'uncertainty, individualisation and risk ... in many of the learning careers examined' (p.97). They propose five risk careers, which account for young people's post-16 aspirations and decisions, and the conditions under which aspirations become fulfilled or not. These particular aspects of learning careers are impacted by economic, social and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Aspiration-setting and decision-making are, for many young people, high-risk activities because many young people are uncertain of their own capabilities, decisions are made with little knowledge or understanding of future events and thirdly these decisions are not easily reversed, implying that there is some forward progression expected of learning careers at the post-16 transition.

Several researchers have extended Bloomer and Hodkinson's work. Lawy (2002b) investigated risk careers; in the same way that post-16 choices are not rational products, he argues that young people's construction of their risk is not 'a technically calculable activity' (Lawy, 2002b, p. 407). Lawy (2002b) provides evidence that risk, identity and learning are related and impact upon one another in an iterative manner. Lawy (2002b, 2003) also acknowledges that identity is transformed by chance happenings, experiences and wider structural and material limits, but extends this study of identity using a single case study demonstrating that identity is as much 'an input into the processes producing change' (Lawy, 2003, p. 342). This typical finding of identity change around the post-16 transition conflicts with Cassidy and Trew (2001) who found a relative stability in quantitative identity measures across the transition.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999) also acknowledge contextual complexities of the post-16 transition. As echoed by Lawy (2002b) several times they mention the significance of happenstance, or serendipity, in young people's lives. Therefore, they can conclude no single theoretical view. They presented a smaller number of interrelated ways of making sense of the post-16 transition. While the data supports the theoretical explanations, one might be cautious given that the theoretical interpretation presented is derived from each of the author's previous work (Hodkinson, 1995; Bloomer, 1996). Furthermore this deductive approach opposes their methodology, which was loosely related to Glaser and Strauss' (1967) Grounded Theory.

Finally a key focus for Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999) is the relation between the qualitative experiences of their participants and FE policy at the end of the 1990s. They conclude that policy largely misunderstands or misrepresents FE and young people's learning. They argue that rather than assuming FE involves a narrowing of an individual's educational focus (Coffield et al., 2008), FE in its entirety should be viewed as a transitional period itself.

### **2.3.5 Ball, Maguire and Macrae – Wider influences upon transition**

Ball et al. (2000) published research on a small cohort of young people during their transition from compulsory schooling and into their post-16 lives. Their significant work focussed on four inter-related themes: the rise and spread of the culture of individualism and economics of individualisation; the intensification of social and economic polarisation; issues around consumerism, leisure and identity; and the alleged demise of class politics alongside the ascendancy of new work and labour market identifications. Although this research considers a greater range of destinations than that of Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997), the focus is perhaps at more of a societal level, rather than on the individuals in question, and, as for Bloomer and Hodkinson, this research focuses on a socio-political context stemming from 18 years of Conservative governments.

Ball et al.'s (2000) work represented a similar methodology to Bloomer and Hodkinson, yet they combined interest in young people's transition from school into new education, training, work and unemployment markets in London, with particular attention to the cultural processes that shape and are shaped by these trajectories. Ball et al. (2000) explored ways in which young people's experiences of school and the post-16 transition in one urban area were related to their social backgrounds and influenced by a highly competitive market for post-16 education. They provide evidence that a hierarchy in the post-16 market had been created by the prevailing policy which actually confirm raced/classed and gendered inequalities rather than address these prevailing issues.

While Bloomer and Hodkinson sought a range of diversity amongst their participants, all were intending pursuing Further Education. Ball et al. (2000) on the other hand, included students from a pupil referral unit in their sample, thus deliberately sampling a diverse range of young people and including those hard to reach young people excluded from mainstream education. Like Bloomer and Hodkinson, their sample of 59 students were followed for three years post-16.

Ball et al.'s (2000) findings supported the pragmatic rational decision making of young people described by Hodkinson et al. (1996), noting that the 'choices' made by the young people in the study, with the exception of those who aimed for higher education, bore little resemblance to the calculative, individualistic, consumer rationalism that predominated in official texts. Ball et al. (2000) considered structure and agency and 'the extent to which young people now see their decision making as individual "choice" rather than the product of structured constraints' (Ball et al., 2000, p. 2). This is discussed in the context of Beck's (1992) and Giddens' (1991) theories. However, Ball et al. did highlight the importance of structured constraints, in particular, social and economic disadvantage in determining life chances particularly with regard to two participants identified as at risk of social exclusion. For these two young women many aspects of their lives were beyond their control. This perceived lack of agency mirrors the findings of Solomon and Rogers (2001) and Reid (1985).

Ball et al. (2000) might have focussed their analysis at a more macro level, but in doing so the particular education and training market in which their participants were placed is more clearly seen, with its purported lack of full time work at 16, leading virtually all participants to recognise the need for qualifications to enter the labour market. Hodkinson et al. (1996) give narrative case studies which illuminate career decision making, whereas, in a presentational difference, Ball et al. typically use their cases to describe a series of broad inter-related points about the post-16 transition for a range of different young people, therefore organising analysis and interpretation thematically.

While Hodkinson and Bloomer (2001) considered young people who dropped out of FE, Ball et al. consider young people who opt out, are excluded from or exclude themselves from what they consider the formal education and training

market. Ball et al. describe how these young people can be invisible (cf. Atkins, 2009) and noted that these young people were 'hard to reach' over the course of the research. Ball et al.'s work therefore extends Hodgkinson and Bloomer in the diversity of the research sample, but also takes a more holistic critique of the possibility of choice at 16. They more succinctly argue that choice, or lack thereof, is constructed and constrained by young people's biographies. In spite of this observation, more emphasis is placed on the actual decisions made by young people. In post-16 interviews many of their participants talked about leaving the decision 'too late' (Ball et al., 1999, p. 209), therefore the pressures of time and significant others are reported to have an impact. Like Bloomer and Hodgkinson, though, they find that 'instability is the rule rather than the exception' (Ball et al., 1999, p. 206), with many of the young people experiencing fragmented post-16 transitions.

Beyond the diverse sample used, Ball et al.'s (2000) contribution is their original theorising on post-16 decision making. They write about the role of imagined futures; by this, Ball et al. refer to the future plans made by young people including their aspirations, dreams and goals. Three types of imagined future are seen in their sample: those with clear imagined futures that appear possible; those with vague imagined futures that appear unstable; and finally those with no imagined future providing a focus for decision making.

Others provide evidence against imagined futures (e.g. Lewis et al., 1999), particularly the assumption that many young people are imagining their future as parents. Likewise Du Bois Raymond (1998) recognises that the present and living life is of greater importance for many youth. Ball et al. (1999, 2000) see decision making around the post-16 transition influenced by young people's pasts, as well as their imagined futures, which do not always fit one another. Furthermore Ball et al. (2000) situate these individual concerns within habituses and social horizons, such that friends and particularly family, as well as class, gender and race, amongst many others fields at once combine to shape the choices young people report that they make at 16 years of age.

Ball et al. (1999) write of the importance of parents and family at this time in young people's lives. Choices are 'rooted in, in one way or another, families'

(Ball et al., 1999, p. 215). This is related to cultural capital, with distinction made between high status families familiar with FE, families without experience and those parents who think FE is a good idea but with no firm reasoning for this. Alongside familial influences and social background, Ball et al. (2000) also raise the importance of compulsory school experiences in terms of post-16 participation. They consider GCSE performance to be a key influence on young people, as students' learning identities are shaped, marked and positioned by their successes and failures at school.

A criticism of Ball et al.'s analysis recognised by the authors themselves is making 'young people sound more serious, more organised and planned than they really are' (Maguire, et al., 2001, p. 199). Ball et al. (1999) acknowledge that discussion of young people's imagined futures, fails to recognise the refusal of adulthood shown by some young people. Likewise unexplained is young people's paradoxical rejection of independence and the desire to accept the uncertainty and insecurity of being an adult (Hutton, 1995). The portrayal of youth as living for the weekend may relate to debates about hedonistic youth (see Hebdidge, 1988) but also recognises that young people have multiple identities (Marginson, 1997). Ball et al. (2000) do capture this, demonstrating across diverse participants that young people construct their identities which are:

contingent on sets of structural and material factors and are embedded in the social fabric of their real social worlds ... different and alternative identities exist at the same time (p. 57).

Ball et al. recognise that they focus upon education and training so may obscure some other priorities that may be of more importance to young people. However, unlike Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999), Ball et al. (2000) purposefully collected and analysed data that moved beyond work and education choices, covering 'family lives, relationships, sexuality, finance, health, religion, politics, leisure, music and drugs' (p. 16). In relation to leisure, Ball et al. did find that the 'capacity to participate and consume was different for different social classes' (2000, p. 69), recognising that even in one urban area geographies and social background vary. Ball et al. extend earlier research by moving beyond a psychological view of adolescence as a transition to adulthood explained biologically and individually (Bynner, 2001), instead

considering the full range of horizons for action (Colley et al., 2003) impacting the post-16 transition from class to family and from the past to imagined future.

## **2.4 The current study**

### **2.4.1 The focus of this research**

The above literature review demonstrates that more comprehensive research has investigated the post-16 transition, compared to research focused upon hard to reach young people. Although the longitudinal work of Bloomer and Hodgkinson and Ball and colleagues increased understanding of the experience of young people across their post-16 transitions, both studies were conducted more than ten years ago. The reviewed studies have typically recruited a diverse range of young people; what is missing from the post-16 transition literature is research focused on hard to reach participants, aiming to understand a particular cohort of young people as they move through a potentially uncertain, extended post-16 transition. Research reviewed in the second section, that has bore more relevance to participants in the current study, has not studied the transitions of hard to reach young people longitudinally.

Young people at risk of social exclusion warrant further explanation given policy focus on social justice and inclusion of education and training (Ball et al., 2000). Given that NEET and JWT should become obsolete labels in 2013 (RPA), research is called for that seeks to understand how young people make the transition to non-participation and perhaps as importantly, considers how young people at risk of not participating avoid fulfilling their hard to reach label. This research therefore does not focus solely upon outsiders (Macrae et al., 1997), but those perceived to be hard to reach ahead of their post-16 transition.

When research has had a more holistic aim to capture the experience of socially excluded youth, it has more typically considered young adults beyond the post-16 transition. For instance, Pavis, Hubbard and Platt (2001) conducted in-depth interviews with 18-25 years olds living in a deprived area of rural

Scotland. However, while the sample could be considered socially excluded on the basis of geography, the sample interviewed were drawn randomly from the majority of 18-25 year olds who were participating in a larger study. While only those out of full-time education were selected, only one participant was unemployed and reasonably able to take up work if it was available. However, Pavis et al.'s (2001) findings do challenge some of the prevailing theory of social exclusion (e.g. Levitas, 2006).

Likewise the research undertaken on Teeside by MacDonald and colleagues (e.g. MacDonald & Marsh, 2001; Webster et al., 2004; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007) as a whole focuses on the experience of 15-25 year olds in some of the most deprived areas of the UK. However, earlier publications do consider the post-16 transitions of some of the sample of young people, although the majority of young people were not interviewed while they were still at school (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005). Their retrospective descriptions of school disaffection often matched those reported by Willis' lads, despite the starkly different post-16 labour markets (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007). Participants' transitions showed predictable patterns of class and gender differentiation, matching participants in earlier studies (e.g. Griffin, 1985). As opposed to Willis' lads, the majority of MacDonald et al.'s participants undertook post-16 education. However, often the negative impact of schooling persisted, with participants often engaging only episodically and were by no means likely to complete their FE courses, demonstrating the potential pervasiveness of learning identities damaged at school (Rees et al., 2007).

#### **2.4.2 Research questions**

The current study responds to the critique of the literature reviewed above, investigating the extended post-16 transition longitudinally. The research fills a gap by focussing on hard to reach young people and investigating their post-16 transitions. These young people were considered less likely than their peers to participate in education and training post-16. As such the research explores one of the last cohorts before RPA in 2013 who were potentially able to move into NEET or JWT categories; investigating their experiences, while also seeking to

understand those young people who do not fulfil the 'hard to reach' label through their transition.

The aim of this study is to elucidate the post-16 transition of a sample of school pupils who were identified as 'hard to reach' during Key Stage 5 of their UK education. The research responds to the recommendations made in the literature reviewed above. It will focus beyond education and question those dispositions that effect young people's decisions and experiences, as well as the full range of important influences in the young people's lives. The data arising from the interpretative methodology used was not intended to provide definitive answers to a set of research questions which stem from the objectives of the research. Indeed, hypotheses are not tested or statistical answers given, as for scientific methodologies. However, the research questions are important as they frame the research, giving it focus and operationalising the aim. The research questions are statements that identify the phenomenon to be studied (Backman & Kyngäs, 1999), deliberately formulated to give flexibility and freedom to explore the phenomenon under study in depth (Glaser, 1978).

The amount that is broadly known about the post-16 transition and hard to reach young people considered in this chapter, gives a substantive area on which the research focuses, as such broad research questions could be written that retained the flexibility and freedom to explore the substantive area in depth (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I aim to both provide insight on these questions, while accepting that the research will provoke further questions considered in the final chapter.

Therefore the study aimed to address the following research questions:

- a) What are the interests and experiences of young people identified as hard to reach at school, across their post-16 transition?
- b) What meanings and understandings do these young people hold regarding their post-16 transitions?

This chapter has provided a critical overview of key previous studies investigating the post-16 transition. It situated the decision to focus upon 'hard to reach' young people within a wider narrative of labelling and its effects on

young people. The review of the literature supported the point made in the previous chapter, that this study fills a gap in the literature by focusing upon the experiences and understandings of hard to reach young people longitudinally over their post-16 transition. The next chapter builds upon the literature reviewed, outlining the methodology utilised to address the research questions above. It details the methods used in order to gather qualitative data from hard to reach young people.

## Chapter three

### 3. Methodology and Methods

In the previous chapter I justified the use of the non-pejorative term 'hard to reach' over other similar terms and, after reviewing research pertinent to the current study, demonstrated a gap in the literature to be filled by a study concentrating on young people identified as 'hard to reach'. This chapter discusses *how* the young people participating in this research were studied to address the research questions.

The chapter is organised into two main sections. In the first part the paradigmatic assumptions, theoretical framework and methodological decisions implicated by the aims of this research are discussed. The aim of this study was to understand the post-16 transition of a sample of school pupils who were identified as 'hard to reach' during Key Stage 5 of their UK education. I demarcate the current study's ontological and epistemological position by drawing upon literature reviewed in the previous chapter. I outline the methodology used, one which flexibly draws from a range of interpretative methodologies including grounded theory.

The second section of this chapter is concerned with the operationalisation of the research. In this section I highlight the necessity of a longitudinal design. I describe the characteristics of the sample of young people who participated and the location of the study. I explain my decision to use one-to-one, open-ended interviews with the participants as the method. I follow this with recognition of the ethical concerns in conducting this study in light of the young people who participated and the method used. The analytical framework is described, delineating how the interview data was coded, interpreted and then organised.

## **Part 1**

### **3.1 The theoretical framework**

While much evidence speaks of the short- and long-term benefits of remaining in education or training at 16 years of age, there is a paucity of research that looks beyond the educational transition at the current end of compulsory schooling in the UK, to investigate how 'hard to reach' young people experience this transition as a potentially significant step in their life course (Kelly, 2003). Such young people warrant understanding given their pertinence to policy around social inclusion and particularly RPA. The research questions were written to address this need and fill the gap in the literature:

- a) What are the interests and experiences of young people identified as hard to reach at school, across their post-16 transition?
- b) What meanings and understandings do these young people hold regarding their post-16 transitions?

These research questions hold implications for both the methodology used and the design of the study. My interest in young people's experiences, understandings and meanings had repercussions in terms of the theoretical framework which could sensibly be employed. As I discuss below, the interpretive needs of the research immediately ruled out certain ontologies and epistemologies, which in turn constrains the methods that could be used.

#### **3.1.1 Paradigmatic assumptions**

The paradigmatic assumptions that lay the foundations for my methodological choices are discussed here. I consider the ontological and epistemological basis for the research that fit the aims outlined above. An ontological position can be understood as beliefs held about the nature of beings, reality and substance (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). This may range from a strictly realist position which sees an objective reality available to the scientist to test and measure, to nominalist world views which consider there to be no one reality that can be understood (Chambliss, 2006). A nominalist ontology fits the current study. Nominalist ontologies typically either hold that each person constructs

their particular worldview or that a reality is only borne out through the language used to describe the world that people interact with.

This study involves capturing the phenomenological experience of young people over time and gaining an understanding of the post-16 transition for those selected as 'hard to reach'. A realist ontology would not accomplish this. Realist ontologies assume that the world is as people see and experience it and can be described as a set of observable facts (e.g. Pring, 2000). This worldview assumes that meaning is there to be observed and can be measured objectively by controlling observations, therefore representing a pure scientific method (Locke, 1969).

Methods that stem from a realist ontology have shown us, for example, that identities may remain stable over the course of an adolescent transition (Cassidy & Trew, 2001), and highlighted differences in participation post-16 between the home nations (Raffe, Croxford & Brannen, 2001). This type of realist work holds limitations in terms of ecological validity, lack of reflection, dehumanisation and limited levels of meaning (Kierkegaard, 1974; Ions, 1977; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Pring, 2000). Indeed the quantitative data in these two examples tells us little, if anything, about the individual experience of participants and decontextualises the transition from the real world in which it takes place and in which it is understood over time.

Nominalist ontologies reject the belief that human nature is governed by general, universal laws and characterised by underlying regularities (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). They assume instead that the social world can only be understood from the standpoint of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action investigated. The implication of this worldview is that an individual's behaviour can only be understood by the researcher sharing their understanding of the world around them. It therefore implies that the researcher cannot be objective and distant from the research context (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000).

The work of Bourdieu and other theorists recognises the mutability of structure and agency and that issues of class, race and gender are not fixed. This was

demonstrated in the previous chapter where Bloomer and Hodkinson (1999) recognised the complex interplay of structure and agency seen in young people's post-16 transitions. This contrasts with more realist research such as the work of Foskett et al. (2008) that attempts to identify particular factors involved in all young people's post-16 transitions. Reducing transition to a fixed set of factors applicable to all experiences tells us little, if anything, about the unique experience of participants and decontextualises the transition from the real world in which it takes place and in which it is understood over time. Therefore a nominalist ontology is needed for the current study.

### *Epistemology*

While ontology is the study of being, epistemology sits alongside this and is concerned with the nature of knowledge (Hamlyn, 1995). The consideration of epistemology gives a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible within this study and allows some consideration of the legitimacy and adequacy of the knowledge sought. Ontological and epistemological issues tend to emerge together (Crotty, 1998). The epistemology used in this study refers to how the participants' views of the world were captured. The epistemology that fits this study and a nominalist ontology is constructivism.<sup>1</sup>

Constructivism 'is the view that all knowledge and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent on human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Meaning is not discovered, nor is it objective or even subjective (Rorty, 1991); it is constructed by people as they engage with the world. This implies that young people construct meaning as they live out their lives. They may reconstruct their understanding when recalling their interpretations (Seidman, 2006), but the meanings participants report are not necessarily subjective as per the

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<sup>1</sup> Some authors, e.g. Green, Camilli and Elmore (2006), consider interpretivism as an epistemology, rather than a methodology as assumed here and elsewhere (e.g. Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

interpretative critique, since they are 'relational, social and cultural to the core' (Neimeyer, 2009, p. ix).

The epistemology in opposition to constructivism is positivism. Since this research assumes that young people are deliberate and creative in their actions, making meanings in and through their activities, a positivist epistemology would be unsuitable (Blumer, 1969). Positivist epistemologies sit under realist ontologies. The positivist epistemology retains many of the criticisms of its ontology (see Kierkegaard, 1974; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Pring, 2000). Values are excluded and their influence on a researcher's conclusions are denied. As such, ethical considerations tend to be extrinsic rather than intrinsic; this would be most problematic for the current study as the later section on ethics implies. Positivism seeks findings which are verifiable and true (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), therefore many consider that the constrained world addressed by positivism may not be the world we experience (Crotty, 1998), or the one inhabited by the young people studied here.

A major criticism of positivism regards the objectivity it ascribes to its findings (Crotty, 1998). This was evident in the previous chapter, where the more positivist research reviewed attempted to draw quite definite conclusions from its findings. McIntosh & Houghton's (2006) research raised particular limitations of positivism. Positivist research is typically scientific and therefore hypothetico-deductive, whereby theory informs data collection. Hypotheses formed in advance of research lead to the identification of key variables, an important methodological point of departure in each of these studies.

The majority of the research investigating the post-16 transition reviewed in the previous chapter does not adopt a positivist epistemology. In order to explore the experience and understandings of young people, a qualitative framework is needed, rather than quantitative data approximating a limited number of variables that can be tested (Howe, 2003). However, this is not just the trend in researching youth transitions; indeed, Howe and Eisenhart (1990) go as far as to reject positivist epistemologies in all social research. Given that the current study seeks to explore how young people make sense of their worlds, how they come to understand their lives and make meaning within them, a constructivist

epistemology is preferred over positivism. Indeed, the study investigates young people's own meanings; doing so without delineating these meanings in advance of the research to be tested. The research addresses the need for elucidation of this type of young person at this time of their life, while allowing their voice to take centre stage (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), rather than relying upon how others construct their worlds.

### **3.1.2 Interpretivism**

The methodological approach that sits under the paradigmatic assumptions outlined above and allows an exploration of participants' experiences, meanings and understandings is interpretivism (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). Interpretivist research does not strive to uncover an objective truth. Instead interpretivist methodologies appreciate the necessary subjectivity involved in interpreting often qualitative data, in order to reach a deeper understanding of the variables or the phenomenon under scrutiny. Interpretivism attempts to discover meanings by comprehending the whole subject in all its richness, depth, and complexity (Putnam, 1983).

The roots of interpretivism are contested; Williams (2000) sees interpretivism as drawing upon the philosophy of idealism, while Crotty (1998) argues that interpretivism is founded upon cultural anthropology. However, all recognise the need for interpretivist methodologies to draw upon qualitative data:

[The] qualitative method [is] the only way to obtain data on many areas of social life not amenable to the techniques for collecting quantitative data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 17).

Interpretivists seek to understand and analyse the perceptions people confer upon their own and others' actions (Hussey & Hussey, 1997), exploring 'the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it' (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). Interpretative research is concerned with depth of meaning and understanding of the social milieu involved in a particular phenomenon (Myers, 1997).

Interpretivism sees people actively constructing their social world and implies

the use of methods that examine situations through the eyes of participants. Situations are seen as fluid and changing rather than fixed and static, and therefore events and behaviour are richly affected by context. Language and discourse delimit people's understanding of their social world, thus many of the methodologies associated with this approach capture the meanings participants express about their worlds. Hence it is of importance to use an interpretative methodology that not only reveals the meanings young people hold, but appreciates the language they use to render their evolving social worlds.

The aim of interpretative research is to offer a perspective of a situation that explores, describes and illustrates the corresponding phenomenon (Myers, 2000). The rich, contextual detail characteristic of interpretivism is often called thick description (Geertz, 1973). Such thick description is necessary to see all the possible meanings actors within a phenomenon hold. However, the use of interpretivist methodologies and approaches carries the demand that one should transcend the data through robust interpretation that contributes to the knowledge of a field (Wolcott, 1994).

The work of Shildrick and MacDonald (2007) that I described in Chapter two represents one of many examples of interpretivist research in the field of youth transitions. Shildrick and MacDonald, amongst others, recognise that the focus of much youth transition research is too narrow and also marginalises young people's first hand accounts of growing up and their role in that process. As such they use biographical interviews to capture rich detail about the young people who participate in their study. They investigated youth transitions in an area of severe socio-economic deprivation, thus focusing on a particular context that warrants understanding. They conducted numerous interviews in order that their research could provide a 'close-up insight into the ways those people at the sharp end live through conditions of social exclusion' (*ibid.*, p. 592). Finally their research fits the goal of interpretivism since the unconstrained qualitative data collected is not presented descriptively, but is used to extend and challenge existing theory in the analysis.

Interpretivism clearly fits the aims of the current study and allows the research questions to be addressed. However, interpretivism has been criticised on the

grounds of generalisability of findings (Williams, 2000). Interpretivism's focus on richness of data rather than quantity, its potential for subjectivity in interpretations and the importance of context, means that one cannot confidently generalise beyond the participants and setting studied (Hatch, 2002). However, authenticity and credibility of the interpretation is the goal, rather than accuracy and the ability to extrapolate to others in different contexts (Lincoln, 1995).

Interpretivism is a personal endeavour on the part of the researcher (Gulati, 2009). Subjectivity therefore must come into play and remains a potential criticism of interpretative research (Shipman, 1997). Because interpretative research assumes that reality is socially constructed, the researcher becomes the vehicle by which this construction is revealed (Andrade, 2009). In the current study, I as researcher and the young people as participants, are partners in the generation of meaning. So rather than reconstructing participants' constructions according to my own viewpoint, I have sought a deeper, richer understanding of the interpretations and reconstructions revealed in participants' data. I elaborate on how I have achieved this later in the chapter. Subjectivity may be at the fore, but it can be 'backed with quality arguments rather than statistical exactness' (Garcia & Quek, 1997, p. 459).

### **3.1.3 Interpretative Methodologies**

Every piece of research is unique and calls for a unique methodology (Crotty, 1998, p. 14).

Interpretivism provides a range of methodologies that can be used and adapted (Cohen et al., 2000). Several options are considered here: Ethnography; case study; hermeneutics; grounded theory. In the next section I describe how they are drawn upon to give the particular methodological framework used in this research.

## *Ethnography*

Ethnography has its roots in social anthropology and fits with the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism (Crotty, 1998). This methodology seeks to expound the lived experience of the subject of study. For ethnography the notion of empathy, particularly taking the place of those researched, is central (*ibid.*). Credence is placed on the social setting studied; the task being to document the culture under study, rather than maintaining focus on the individual participants (Hammersley, 1985). While the aims of this research are not expressly focussed on the culture of the young people identified as hard to reach, ethnography's objective to get inside the world of its participants as a group and for the ethnographer to set aside any predispositions they may have about the research setting, fit the aims of this study (Cresswell, 2007).

Willis' (1977) study discussed in chapter 2 used an ethnographic methodology. In doing so, Willis was able to give a detailed account of what life was like for 'the lads'; however, a limitation of the study, and of ethnographic methods, is the focus on the culture of the group, as opposed to an appreciation of differences in meanings held by individuals within the group. Willis's work has also been criticised for presenting an overly simplistic theorisation of the range of orientations possible amongst working-class young people (Brown, 1987). Hence an ethnographic approach can be complimented by other interpretive methodologies.

## *Case Study*

Atkins' (2009) work, which was also discussed in the previous chapter, used a case study methodology and presented data in a narrative form. Case study and narrative inquiry are both interpretative methodologies that also offer options for the presentation of analysis (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007), which is discussed later in this chapter. Case studies understandably focus on a particular case, however they tend to employ multiple methods and retain the goal of understanding the case and associated context. Thus, like ethnography, when the case is not an individual, the focus is firmly upon the group experience. Indeed, Atkins' (2009) case study suffers from a focus on the case

setting and the groups therein. Rather than place a precedent on the meanings and understandings provided by the young people who participated, a range of data is collected to understand the case; this results in a lack of verbatim quotes from the young people and a lack of appreciation of their individual differences.

Where used in previous research, narrative inquiry aids in illuminating the interpretations made, providing evidence, often in young people's verbatim words, for the theoretical analysis given. Atkins' (2009) use of narrative inquiry was to provide the story of the experience of young people upon particular courses in particular colleges. On the other hand, Ball et al.'s (2000) use of narrative inquiry allowed for an exploration of participants' backgrounds and the part this plays in shaping young people's experiences. Unlike Atkins, the narratives collected by Ball et al. also effectively demonstrate the similarities and differences amongst young people.

### *Hermeneutics*

Hermeneutics offers another option for studying the lives of young people. According to Guba and Lincoln (2005), constructivism adopts a hermeneutic dialectical methodology; while Blaikie (2007) considers interpretivism as having its origins in hermeneutics, rather than hermeneutics necessarily being one of many interpretative methodological choices. Hermeneutics involves studying the biographies of participants and carries the assumption that individuals naturally interpret and make sense of the worlds in which they live. Hermeneutics acknowledges the centrality of language in human society (Crotty, 1998). Therefore interviews are used primarily as the method to gather the rich detail needed for dialogical hermeneutics.

While the hermeneutic endeavour seems to sit well with the focus on the young people under study, hermeneutics can be considered a subjective endeavour as the researcher also brings to the fore their experiences related to the area of study, such that the analysis documents the researcher's developed understanding of the area after shared experiences with participants (Whitehead, 2004). The narrative produced is therefore co-authored between

researcher and participant (Laverty, 2003), this steps beyond the co-construction of meaning discussed earlier. Given my lack of shared experiences with the young people participating and the aim to interpret their understandings, the interpretive methodology used needed to be grounded in the voice of the young people.

### *Grounded Theory*

Grounded theory was promulgated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and follows in the footsteps of Merton's serendipity (1949); unanticipated, irregular and strategic findings which gives rise to new hypotheses. Since Glaser and Strauss' book "The Discovery of Grounded Theory", the methodological framework has developed and grounded theory has become a popular method across the social sciences from criminology to education (Lopez & Emmer, 2000; Schraw, Wadkins & Olafson, 2007). Indeed grounded theory method has been cited as the most widely used qualitative research method across a wide range of disciplines and subject areas (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007).

Grounded theory is at once a methodological approach, analytical procedure and an end result. Grounded theory as a methodology refers to a strategy for research and an analytical framework, while 'a grounded theory' is a theory generated on the basis of the ensuing analysis. While this may cause confusion in use of the terminology (Thomas & James, 2007), coterminous data collection, analysis and theory construction are a hallmark of the holistic methodological recipe (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory is often characterised as an inductive method, with focus upon interpreting from the data rather than existing hypotheses or theory (Haig, 1995).

Grounded theory is often referred to as the constant comparative method. As characterised by Fraenkel and Wallen (2003), this is 'a continual interplay between the researcher, his or her data, and the theory that is being developed ... until a fit between theory and data is achieved' (p. 438). This description of constant comparison reveals two further hallmarks of classic grounded theory. Theoretical sampling refers to the collection of data informed by the ongoing

analysis and theory that emerges (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Despite this 'emergence' (see Glaser, 1992) the relationship between data collection and analysis is not haphazard, with analysis expected to be undertaken as soon as possible and for the outcomes of the analysis to inform further sampling and specific data collection.

The grounded theorist, while working toward an *a posteriori* theory, is actually constantly moving between inductive and deductive thinking (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), in that during theoretical sampling certain hypotheses are made (deductive) that are then checked against data (inductive). This helps waive the criticism that inductive grounded theory is an 'epistemological fairy tale' (Wacquant, 2002). The goal of the grounded theory process is theoretical saturation (Glaser, 1978). Therefore the iterative process of data collection, analysis and theory-building continues until the theory is fully developed and tested using both incoming data and often the re-analysis of previously collected data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Several of the key contemporary studies reviewed in the previous chapter draw upon grounded theory methodology. For instance, although they do not identify their analysis as grounded theory, Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) began analysis early, used theoretical sampling and tested theoretical models against subsequent data. Perhaps Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) do not consider their analysis grounded theory since their analysis tests the existing 'models of learning career and pragmatically rational decision making' (p. 9), rather than grounding analysis in the data alone. Ball et al. (2000) clearly draw upon grounded theory, they state that their analysis involved the 'joint collection, coding and analysis of data' (p. 16) and that the analysis was 'substantive' (p. 17). Unlike Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997), their 'accounts of these young people's lives are theoretically grounded' (Ball et al., 2000, p. xii); however, they also adapt grounded theory by presenting the analysis as 'analytic sets of young people' (p. 17), rather than categories of a named grounded theory. It is clear then that the post-16 transition can be researched longitudinally with the use of grounded theory and adapted so the methodology and analysis is fit for the purpose of a particular study.

### 3.1.4 Adapting grounded theory for the current study

Of the interpretative methodologies discussed grounded theory is the one I have drawn upon the most to address the aims of the current study. However, limitations of the approach were identified in the short description given above. Hence this section justifies the primary choice of grounded theory as a methodology and how it is used flexibly as a means to an end in this study. I describe the adaptation of grounded theory I have used in order to overcome the limitations of the more post-positivist<sup>1</sup> grounded theory that remains in high use (Corbin & Strauss, 2007) and primarily to best understand the experience of young people at their post-16 transition and allow for its interpretation.

Charmaz (2006) re-examined the key principles of grounded theory through the methodological lens of the present century. She believes that one does not *discover* grounded theory with theoretical understanding emerging from the data, rather it is constructed by the researcher, participants' voice and context. "[D]iscovered" reality arises from the interactive process and its temporal, cultural, and structural contexts' (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524). As such, Charmaz moves her conception of grounded theory away from post-positivism, rejecting previous views of scientific discovery and objectivism (Annells, 1997) that were inherent in early grounded theory texts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1978; Strauss, 1987).

Constructivist grounded theory fits this research problem because it does not force a pre-specified procedure upon data collection in order that a grounded theory emerges from the process. Instead it allows for responsive data collection and adaptable analysis. Adopting this constructivist position permits the search for meaning amongst data, accepting that multiple meanings may be found (Charmaz, 1995), while acknowledging subjectivity My use of this methodology allows for the interpretation of young people at the post-16 transition, but also calls for their stories and therefore their constructions to be visible in the analysis (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> Grounded theory as Glaser and Strauss introduced the methodology and each author developed it is generally considered post-positivist given the criteria, verification and 'science of discovery' inherent in their conceptualisation of the methodology (Birks & Mills, 2011).

Grounded theory studies tend to be oriented around action and process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990); both are evident in this study's focus upon experience over the post-16 transition. The experience of the young people in this study naturally involves action and the longitudinal sampling allows investigation of any processual change. Meanwhile constant comparison, the core of grounded theory method, facilitates the generation of theories of process, sequence and change (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). However, the creation of 'theory' as an outcome of grounded theory has been sensibly challenged (Thomas & James, 2006), given the subjectivity in the *understandings* that the methodology gives. Still grounded theory as a methodology appears well suited to produce a theoretical understanding (Charmaz, 2006) of the transitions of the young people participating between the ages of 14-18 years.

A central feature of the current study is the longitudinal design, described below. Grounded theory has been used to study longitudinal samples before; Corbin (1987) gives a grounded theory of how pregnant women with chronic illness managed their pregnancies, demonstrating that the approach as viewed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) is amenable to sampling the same participants over time and that theoretical sampling can comfortably fit within this research design. Moreover, as mentioned previously, several of the key longitudinal studies reviewed in the previous chapter draw upon grounded theory methodology. Both Ball et al. (2000) and Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) retained grounded theory's theoretical sampling. While it is normal for further rounds of data collection to take place (e.g. Nathaniel, 2004; Schraw et al., 2007), theoretical sampling raises specific questions to ask of existing as well as incoming data, thus refining analysis alongside the collection of more longitudinal biographical data.

A controversial hallmark of grounded theory is also the title of Glaser's 1978 book, *Theoretical Sensitivity*. Theoretical sensitivity can best be described as a personal quality the grounded theorist ought to continually develop (Glaser & Strauss, 1967):

Theoretical sensitivity refers to the attribute of having insight, the ability to give meaning to data, the capacity to understand and the capability to

separate the pertinent from that which isn't (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 42).

Importantly though, my insights during the current study were grounded in the data, rather than pre-existing concepts. Yet, 'the researcher does not approach reality as a tabula rasa. He must have a perspective that will help him see relevant data and abstract significant categories from his scrutiny of the data' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 3). Theoretical sensitivity gained in part from an awareness of relevant literature allowed me to interpret data. Indeed, Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue that claiming ignorance of related literature is misguided, although I always aimed to bracket my existing knowledge and preconceptions when coding the data collected, so as not to force received theory upon the voice of the young people.

To bracket, the researcher must identify and suspend what he/she already knows about the experience being studied and approach the data without preconceptions' (Backman & Kyngäs, 1999, p148).

Therefore the previous literature review chapter does not represent my preconceptions heading into the current study. I was aware of the key studies in the field and associated theories, but was careful not to use them as a theoretical framework or lens through which to view the data. However, employing the constant comparative method leads to comparison of coded data and research literature as relevant. Therefore as several contemporary grounded theorists have suggested, previous literature plays its part amid theoretical sampling (Goldkhul & Cronholm, 2003). Ultimately, the neat organisation of the literature review chapter and the use of literature during discussion in the proceeding analysis chapters was as much a result of, rather than a precursor to, the grounded theory methodology employed.

Grounded theory fits with both the paradigmatic assumptions of this research, the longitudinal design and the study's aims. The preceding consideration of the development of grounded theory, as well as the particular research problem to be investigated here meant I needed to adapt the methodology to fit the design of this study, particularly its longitudinal dimension, as well as overcoming the criticisms of grounded theory raised above. This is commensurate with Glaser and Strauss's view of grounded theory as a developing method and Dey's (1999) call for the method to evolve while maintaining its rigour. Nevertheless, I

demonstrate that the approach used here is not a diluted version of grounded theory of which others have been accused (see Stern, 1994), nor is it a recapitulation of the post-positivist method that is widely followed (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), instead the use of grounded theory in this study has been flexibly tailored to fit the needs of the research.

## **Part 2**

### **3.2 Methods**

The research design outlined here in the second section of this chapter was informed by the paradigmatic assumptions and methodological framework outlined above. Fundamentally, the methods had to allow quality data to be gathered from the young people participating in the study. Grounded theory's theoretical sampling and constant comparison guided decisions around data collection, allowing a theoretical understanding of the young people's post-16 transition to be reached (Charmaz, 2006). Aspects of the design of this study are handled in turn, with the analytical framework employed outlined later.

#### **3.2.1 Longitudinal Study**

The focus of this research was upon the post-16 transition, an extended period of the lives of the young people participating. Some research focuses on one particular time in young people's lives, for instance some of Stokes and Wyn's (2007) participants reveal their thoughts about their upcoming transition; Bates and Riseborough's (1993) ethnographies of groups of young people on Youth Training Schemes considers them only at that point in time; and Ashton and Field's three types of career trajectory were based upon data collected from young workers post-transition. While the post-16 transition has become more protracted over time (Stokes & Wyn, 2007), previous research, which offers only a snapshot at one point in time, underestimates the importance of transformation and identity change experienced by individuals across the post-16 transition (e.g. Lawy, 2002a). A longitudinal approach therefore allows for this focus, as well as a consideration of whether the post-16 transition is a

predicted major life change for young people (Wyn & White, 1997).

Longitudinal data collection can 'explore the detailed lives of individual young people ... how their life histories, lifestyles and dispositions to learning evolve and change' (Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1999, p.8). By sampling the same participants over time, longitudinal research, particularly qualitative longitudinal studies, provide a rare insight into the ways participants live through their experiences (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007). Comparison of data over time allows for an enhanced understanding of the meanings revealed by participants (Lawy, 2002a), thus complementing the interpretative approach discussed above. Previous studies have compared different cohorts of participants pre-transition, with those post-transition (e.g. Walker, 2007). However, my sensitising study which I described in chapter one, involving interviews with the same participants in school and then in FE post-transition, revealed change in young people across their post-16 transitions, indicating the need to follow particular individuals over time. However, this does not necessarily imply focus on the individuals themselves. Rather, these accounts can be compared as a whole in order to reach a deeper understanding of the trajectories of a cohort of young people.

While the post-16 transition itself can be seen as a process, assumed at the very least to incorporate the change between the end of compulsory schooling and commencement of a post-16 destination, experience itself is temporal and a detailed understanding of any experience requires a consideration of the anticipatory time in advance of the experience, as well as the outcome and ramifications of the experience (Ruspini, 2002). Therefore a longitudinal study gathering data over an extended period of time was necessary to address the aims of this study (Cohen et al., 2000). Furthermore, longitudinal research gives potential for rapport and trust. Participation over time can allow participants to become more comfortable and familiar with providing the biographical data and reflection on action sought by interpretative research (Best, 2007).

Following the same individual gives richer data, allowing an individual to take several vantage points on critical incidents over time and importantly permits comparative analysis, thus investigating and comparing the process

experienced by many individuals. Longitudinal studies allow both prospective and retrospective data collection and analysis (Cohen et al., 2000). For instance, participants initially could provide retrospective data on what experiences brought them to their final years of compulsory schooling while offering prospective understandings of the post-16 transition. In future data collection the same participants could reflect on how their anticipation matched their experience, while still giving ongoing prospective detail of their post-16 lives.

Strengths of the longitudinal approach are implied above, while the literature review chapter revealed several instances of longitudinal researching enhancing understanding of youth transitions (e.g. Willis, 1977; Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997, 1999; Ball et al., 2000; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007; Quinn et al., 2008). The major disadvantage of longitudinal studies is sample attrition (Lynn, 2009). Collecting data at several points in time from the same individuals gives numerous occasions where participants may drop out of the research. In actuality participants may withdraw even after the research, which ethically they must always have the choice to do. Also within the period of the research participants may have moved out of the study area or changed their contact details, meaning that some participants are lost through no choice of their own.

While participants may drop out of longitudinal research over time, this problem may have been more critical given the type of young person participating in this research. Wise (2001) found that hard to reach young people could be reluctant to participate or express their views. Likewise Quinn et al. (2008) found difficulties in arranging data collection with young people in JWT and were unable to hold a large focus group as young people were unwilling to participate. This highlights the importance of well planned recruitment and retention of participants in the current study; these design decisions are justified later. A particular problem of sample attrition in longitudinal research is the potential that those who drop out represent a particular type of participant. Here in this study it might be expected that those who drop out might be the hardest to reach; losing these participants would lose some of the diversity of the sample and potentially important participants.

Another criticism that can be charged of longitudinal research is measurement effect (Cohen et al., 2000). If participation affects the attitudes and behaviour of participants then over time the participants' understandings and meanings may become more indebted to questioning and reflections made as part of the research. How I overcame these limitations of longitudinal research is discussed later in the methods section.

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999) provide an example of the use of a longitudinal design in the study of the post-16 transition. While the longitudinal interviews held with individuals primarily allowed a rich study of change in their lives, the longitudinal design also assisted their analysis. Analyses after early interviews identified issues and themes that could be incorporated in subsequent interviews. Individual stories were also reanalysed on the basis of new interview data. While this most often gave detail and authenticity to individual narratives, at times Bloomer and Hodkinson needed to revise their formative theorising on the basis of incoming data. So a longitudinal design also assists the credibility of analysis allowing the researcher to move backwards and forwards between individual stories and theoretical interpretations, future data collection refining both.

### **3.2.2 The sample and its context**

This study was located in an area of the South West of England. This area combines a mix of rural villages and urban towns. Around the time the participants left compulsory education<sup>1</sup>, 87.4% of the Year 11 cohort in the county remained in education post-16, 11.1% of school leavers in the area took up jobs, 5.0% jobs with training and 5.1% jobs without training. 5.1% of young people were not in education, employment or training (NEET) after school, although this rises to 6.3% NEET in the area for 16-18 year olds (Connexions Cornwall & Devon, 2008).

Small to medium enterprises dominate employment in the area studied, with few large companies (Devon Renaissance, 2009). As such the UK recession,

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<sup>1</sup> 2008-2009

which commenced in 2008, particularly affected the area with a rise in unemployment of 108% in the area between April 2008 and April 2009 (ONS, 2009). Indeed, the area has traditionally relied upon industries which have retracted during the recession including manufacturing and construction. However, tourism has continued to be a strong, yet seasonal, key industry for the area and in 2010 employment has risen (ONS, 2010). For young people, the recession has led to an increase in youth unemployment and related increase in progression to Further Education (Wright, 2011). Interestingly, the sensitising study, conducted in the same area, showed that young people in 2008 were aware of the 'credit crunch' and this awareness informed their decisions.

The young participants were drawn from all nine secondary schools in the area and the Key Stage 4<sup>1</sup> Pupil Referral Unit. Two large schools with more than 600 Key Stage 4 students are situated in the largest town in the area; this town has a population of 25, 000. Two large schools with more than 500 Key Stage 4 students are situated in medium sized towns and are the only sixth form schools. The majority of other schools are smaller and are situated in small to medium towns. One of these schools has a Skills Centre used by Key Stage 4 students at the school for? post-16 students wishing to undertake qualifications in motor vehicle and construction trades. The smallest school of the nine is located in a village and serves a wide surrounding rural area. The Pupil Referral Unit for Key Stage 4 pupils is located in the largest town of the area and offers several GCSEs as well as various life skill and vocational certificates. The unit has 10-15 pupils at any one time and the majority have been permanently excluded from other schools participating, although some pupils have moved into the area having been permanently excluded where they previously lived.

Participants from all the schools in the area were deliberately included in order to have a geographically diverse sample and in case either being 'hard to reach' or the school practitioner's view of what is 'hard to reach' differed across schools or locations. Furthermore the wide sampling captured socio-economic differences across the area. One of the towns that has a sixth form is amongst the top 10% most deprived areas in the UK and a measure of deprivation in terms of the domain of Education, Skills and Training, shows that both towns

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<sup>1</sup> Students in the final two years of secondary schooling, 14-16 years of age.

with sixth forms and areas of the largest town are amongst the top 10% (Communities and Local Government, 2007). The diversity in socio-economic contexts could affect the post-16 transition for young people in this area, while the more rural locations have challenges of their own in terms of opportunity and transport (Devon County Council, 2009).

Within the area studied there is one large FE College in the largest town. Students at schools with sixth forms often make a choice between remaining at their school after their GCSEs to study A Levels or progress to this FE College. For many of the schools the FE College represents the closest choice for Further Education. The College offers a wide range of A Levels but the majority of 16- to 18-year-old students study vocational qualifications from Foundation Level to Level 3. The College offers a range of Apprenticeships to students who can find an employer who will take them on after school; this is more likely to occur in the urban rather than rural areas, where choice amongst apprenticeship places is limited. The College also offered a range of 14-16 Increased Flexibility Programmes (Golden et al., 2006), in partnership with 7 of the secondary schools, which 12 participants in the study pursued in their final two years of school. For one day a week at Key Stage 4, the young people following this programme undertook a vocational qualification at the FE College. Qualifications offered and undertaken by participants in this study included construction, mechanics, engineering, hair and beauty and uniformed services.

### **3.2.3 Sampling**

The initial interview sample consisted of 51 young people, 16 of whom were in Year 11 or cohort one (9 males and 7 females) and 35 young people in Year 10 or cohort two (20 males and 15 females). A balance of males and females was sought and over subsequent interviews<sup>1</sup> the gender balance became more even (see table 1). The interpretative methodology calls not for a random sample, but for an empathetic understanding of social phenomena and unique participants' points of view (Rodwell, 1998). Therefore a diverse sample was strategically

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<sup>1</sup> Theoretical sampling and the longitudinal design of the study meant that the size of the sample from whom data was collected reduced over time. This is explained below.

recruited that would point towards the similarities and differences amongst young people aged 14-18 years old in the study area. Moreover a wide sample provides the greatest opportunity to gather much data about the phenomenon under investigation and uncover understanding (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). The overall sampling frame was one of interesting and diverse cases, which fits with grounded theory's theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2006). This follows the sampling methods used in the sensitising study and that used elsewhere in the post-16 transition literature (e.g. Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1997).

The sample included young people who were considered hard to reach in their final two years of compulsory schooling. All participants were identified as 'hard to reach' by school practitioners. This is reputational participant selection, since key informants recommended participants on the basis of considering them hard to reach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Headteachers were initially contacted and they put forward practitioners who were often Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) tutors, Pastoral tutors or Heads of Years, to select participants. Contacts were given an information sheet (appendix I) about the study which gave the definition of 'hard to reach' they used to identify potential participants<sup>1</sup>. Contacts often had several young people who were potential candidates for the research, in which case I encouraged selection of participants that appeared from their description to be different from young people already participating at other schools.

Two cohorts of young people participated. Cohort one were in their final year of compulsory schooling (Year 11) and cohort two were a year younger on commencement of data collection (Year 10). Sampling two age groups was undertaken deliberately to extend the age range sampled, therefore allowing the post-16 transition to be captured from two years before to two years after the end of school. This responds to current theorising on the post-16 transition, which is more often now seen as an extended time of change for young people, that can only be fully understood by understanding young people's experience

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<sup>1</sup> 'Hard to reach' learners are those students that are not gaining as much as they could from the learning experience. They are not reaching their potential and at the current point in time a positive post-16 transition is felt to be unlikely by those that work with the student. The reason that these young people are hard to reach may be diverse and/or can be unclear'.

some time before and after the specific milestone that is the end of school (Stokes & Wyn, 2007). Of course interviewing two cohorts over three years was a compromise, necessary because of the finite length of the current study.

Wherever possible I met participants prior to data collection. I told participants what was involved in the study, built rapport, gained informed consent from them and gave the participant a parental consent form to take home to their parent or carer to sign and return to the school (appendix II). Even though all the young people I met agreed to participate at the time, I encouraged them to think about participation between then and data collection and change their mind if they wished; one young person did subsequently decide not to take part, while another did not gain parental consent. In total I met 39 of the 51 participants ahead of any data collection.

Theoretical sampling and the longitudinal design of the study meant that the size of the sample from whom data was collected reduced over time. Table 1 shows how many participants from each cohort participated at each point data was collected. While the sample size decreased considerably from 51 to 14, this was anticipated and is in keeping with similar research that has drawn upon grounded theory (e.g. Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999). The large sample size was initially engaged to overcome sample attrition, which was anticipated from this sample given the experience of researchers who have conducted longitudinal research with similar samples (e.g. Quinn et al., 2008). In fact, the reduction of the sample size over time was primarily due to theoretical sampling. Grounded theory's theoretical sampling dictates that over time interpretation becomes naturally more refined and future data collection more purposeful, therefore leading to a reduction in the amount of interviews conducted. Incidence of drop out was far lower than expected (cf. Curtis et al., 2004; Maguire et al; 2008). This success may have been due to remuneration and efforts I took to collect a range of contact details from participants. Three participants relocated out of the study area ahead of their post-16 transition. Furthermore, five participants were unavailable either because they felt they had no spare time for an interview, were no longer attending school in Year 11, or their school was reluctant for them to participate further.

Table 1. Sample size over time.

	Cohort one		Cohort two		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Interview 1 January – April 2008	9	7	20	15	51
Interview 2 February – April 2009	7	6	10	6	29
Interview 3 February – April 2010	5	4	2	3	14

### 3.2.3 Interviews

Two key reasons guided the selection of interviews as a method of data collection. Firstly, interviews are well suited to understanding the experience of participants, particularly for identifying the meanings they ascribe to their experiences (Kvale, 1996). Interview transcriptions also provide substantial written data, necessary for the grounded theory approach I have outlined above. Interviews allowed for the same individuals to be studied longitudinally and to direct questions in subsequent interviews according to theoretical sampling (Draucker, 2007). Nevertheless interview was a method chosen over other alternatives.

#### *Interview structure*

Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander (1995) describe a continuum of interview methods between structured and unstructured. Therefore, an interview style exists that falls between the ethnographic, non-standardised open-ended unstructured interview and the flexible yet focused content with prepared questions of the semi-structured interview. This is the structure of interview within which the three rounds of interview were placed (figure 1). My unstructured to semi-structured interviews allowed the conversational flow and lack of imposed constraint of the unstructured interview and the flexible yet directed nature of semi-structured interviews. More semi-structured scheduling was required on the basis of theoretical sampling, meaning in re-interviews I asked about particular issues grounded in data already collected, but certainly in initial interviews I did not want to formulate questions that could only reflect

my own interests, opinions or assumptions (Pring, 2000).



Figure 1. Graphical indication of the structure of the three interviews.

This structure of interview led to an open and permissive interviewing strategy (Eriksson et al., 2007), allowing for detailed unconstrained personal accounts to be given by participants. In keeping with the paradigmatic assumptions discussed earlier, interviews aimed to capture action as meaning on the part of participants and elicit thick description (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). The interviews were intersubjective, constructed through conversation (Pring, 2000) and allowed participants to discuss their understanding of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view.

The first interviews were more structured, as more basic information was sought from young people. All participants were at school which meant more greater overlap in questions compared to subsequent interviews where participants post-transition were in a range of post-16 destinations. However, questioning in the first interview was not too structured, so as not to risk pre-determining the concepts that would be revealed as important across participants. The only interview schedule used included the introduction to the interview covering the purpose of research, ethical concerns the background questions and four goals that the interview set out to achieve: All interviews sought to identify 1) what was important to participants, 2) what they were interested in, 3) what they disliked and 4) what they would change if they could (See Appendix III for an example of an interview 1 schedule). While participants knew that this was the goal of the interview, these four questions were not typically asked directly of participants. Instead, conversation attempted to reveal what was important, interesting, disliked and would be changed, with checks that this had been achieved towards the end of the interview.

Sometimes participants might be asked what they were interested in or what

was important to them if an early break in conversation arose, but more time was spent probing the things that appeared to be interesting, important or disliked to participants, investigating why this was the case and what specific incidents demonstrated this. In closing the interview I reminded participants of the aim to cover the four goals and checked that my understanding of what was important, interesting, disliked and worthy of change matched theirs. Often one of these questions was asked again because I felt it had not been well covered, for example, 'is there anything that you would change'. Other times checks were made that nothing had been missed, for example, 'is there anything we have not covered that you feel is important to you'. As for previous research, these end questions often revealed something new and extended the interview, with interviewees offering what they felt they had missed (Patton, 2002).

The interviews therefore had some direction, but did not have fixed questions to be asked; instead these goals were used to let young people talk about their experiences and what was important and relevant to them. The wording and order of the questions was therefore not predetermined; rather they were constructed 'in the moment' according to the interaction (Minichiello et al., 1995; Moustakas, 1990). Such reactive interviewing has been accused of producing 'flaccid data' (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 38), however, this type of interviewing ensured that issues brought to the fore were indeed important to interviewees, not biased by my preconceptions. Furthermore I learnt quickly that directed open ended questions like 'what are you interested in?' met with short closed answers that required probing in a flexible, conversational style. However, holding the four goals mentioned above aided the constant comparative method employed in analysis (Boeije, 2002).

The conversational nature of the interviews did not mean that they were unstructured or random, I was aware of the power that I held in moving the conversations towards those issues that were relevant to the study. For this reason the interviews did reflect my biases to a degree since I was the one framing the questions. Nonetheless I did not react with surprise to anything participants revealed. This non-judgemental approach eased participants. Yet in keeping with grounded theory strategies (Charmaz, 2005), I was sensitive to when responses were unexpected, surprising or conflicted with other

respondents, probing further in these instances to investigate data that might challenge the ongoing analysis.

### *Interview content*

The first interviews included necessary background questions that were asked to each participant. This included parental situation, parents' employment, siblings, who they lived with, whether they had moved around, their school career and GCSEs they were taking. Answers to these background questions were probed further when this information was deemed important to the young person's current situation or revealing of one or more of the four interview goals.

Interviews did not focus exclusively upon education, allowing participants to talk freely and at their discretion about learning, their experiences, their interests, their thoughts about their past and their hopes and plans for the future. In order to capture this range of meaning, I asked a range of questions at several different levels:

- Descriptive questions – for example, What interests do you have? What do you do with your friends?
- Clarifying questions – for example, eg Is that something you do at school? Can you tell me a little more about why you reacted in that way?
- Evaluative questions – for example, How does that make you feel? Tell me about a lesson you enjoyed?
- Questions across time and space – for example, Has it always been like that? Is it the same outside of school?
- Hypothetical/theoretical questions – for example, Would you feel the same if ...? Why do you think like that about ... ? What do you think [person] thinks about that?

Using this range of questioning meant that both broad questions and follow up questions that maintained the focus of the interviews could be asked. To provide necessary detail and to investigate longitudinal change, I asked participants to reflect over time, moving between past, present and future in

their accounts; to compare situations and times; and between description, explanation and evaluation in the course of their accounts. This approach allowed relevant contextual factors to become clear, showing what was important in their lives and what was influencing their experience of the post-16 transition. While participants clearly had not often considered some of the more reflective or evaluative questions before, all participants were capable of explaining their actions and thoughts. As such the more theoretical questions were valuable and assisted the inductive nature of the analysis.

Second and third interviews involved more unstructured interview schedules as interview content moved past background content and a focus upon the four goals of the first interview. Furthermore cohort 1 were out of school, potentially in a range of different circumstances. Still previous interviews with individuals had revealed areas where more information was desired and theoretical sampling meant emerging analytical concepts led to particular topics to cover with participants. However, these interviews were not semi-structured since these areas to be covered were not prepared as questions, rather themes to include conversation upon. Phrasing particular questions to participants could have led to narrow responses. Also second and third interviews needed to allow some unstructured conversation about participant's thoughts, feelings and experiences particularly surrounding events since their last interview, in order to respect the study's longitudinal focus on the post-16 transition as a process and to investigate any change in the individual over time. I also checked whether the background information had changed during the second and third interview (See Appendix IV for an example of later interview schedule).

#### *Interview procedure*

Interviews were conducted one-to-one with participants. The first interviews were all located at the schools young people attended; typically interviews were held in an office, meeting room or classroom. Interviews were often held during one lesson, with the participant being excused from that lesson. Oftentimes this period of around 55 minutes was enough time for the interview, on a number of occasions interviews went over time into the young person's next lesson, break

or lunch time. Without exception the young people were happy to continue. On four occasions additional time was arranged to continue the interview at another time.

The first interviews spanned a period of 5 months, due to differences in how quickly schools located participants and arranged interviews and given that cohort two participants (Year 10 at this point) were selected and interviewed ahead of the older cohort one participants. Over this period several interviews often occurred per day, which meant that transcribing and coding could not always be completed immediately after interview. Wherever possible this did occur, in order that the ongoing analysis might inform the interviews still to take place (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

It was assumed that cohort two's participants initially in Year 10, would be available to interview again a year later at their schools. Cohort one's Year 11s would be out of school a year later so contact details were sought from them at the end of their first interview if they indicated that they would consider participating again, which all participants did. A range of contact details were sought (appendix V) in case situations were to change in the year between interviews. Indeed, the young people participating were more likely than not to change their mobile phone numbers in the time between interviews, so having home phone numbers and addresses was vital.

For the post-16 interviews, participants had left school and were attending sixth forms, colleges, work, apprenticeships or were out of work. Therefore the location of interviews was not as predictable as interviews held at schools. Regardless of whether participants were attending the College, these Interviews often took place in an FE College I had ready access to in the large, central town mentioned above. This enabled suitable conditions for a private interview and also gave some consistency in interviewing. Holding the interview in College premises did not appear to affect participants out of education negatively; rather, they more readily spoke of their reasons for not going to College. Nevertheless, participants could suggest a setting for an interview; two interviewees did so and chose a public house and a coffee shop. After attempting to interview a participant in a noisy pub, I subsequently was more

likely to suggest interviews were held in rooms booked at learning centres conveniently located in town centres, where quiet rooms could be used. It was in these learning centres that the majority of interviews held out of the FE College were located.

In November 2008 I finalised which participants ought to be interviewed a second time. Second interviews were conducted with 29 participants that took place between February and April in 2009; just over a year after the first interviews. By the final interviews, a year later in 2010, a diverse sample of 14 key cases could easily be identified and participants who were similar in experiences or post-16 destination were ruled out. All participants were out of school in 2010, therefore contact details previously provided were relied upon. As for cohort one's second interviews, some participants did not reply to emails or phone messages; however, all of the key participants, bar one who had moved out of the area ahead of his post-16 transition anyway, were reached and did participate. I found that with persistence and thanks to collecting several means of contacting participants I did not lose any of the more indispensable participants. Post-16 destinations information was collected for all participants who completed two interviews, regardless of whether they participated in a third interview. A timeline showing the procedure of the research is located in Appendix VI.

### *Challenges of interviewing*

While interviews were the clear method of choice for giving the young people in this study a voice to express the personal meanings behind their experiences, this is not to say that interviewing such young people was straightforward. The type of pupil who would be identified as hard to reach is not always the most communicative or skilled/experienced in expressing thoughts and feelings (Curtis et al., 2004). Indeed, if hard to reach young people are reluctant to fill in questionnaires, then they are likely to be disinclined interviewees. Aspects of interviewing, such as rapport building and participant ease, were therefore all the more important.

In order that the young people did engage with the research, I found that it was necessary to do several things related to building rapport. What aided the success of the interviews was both meeting participants ahead of the actual interview and explaining what the research was about. It was, perhaps surprisingly the latter, which was key. By informing the young people that their participation helped me and that understanding people like them was important, the majority were happy to help. Considering that participants' schools considered them hard to reach, it was important to dissociate myself with the school, to make it clear that the research was for me and the University of Exeter. This included dressing more casually than perhaps staff would. It was also important to react to the participants in a non-judgemental manner, in doing so their voices were afforded authority and the power differentials between interviewer and interviewee were reduced (Lee & Breen, 2007).

The first interviews commenced with some background questions. These were straightforward questions that required a closed answer, e.g. 'do you have any brothers or sisters?' Such questions meant participants could ease themselves into the interview and become comfortable conversing ahead of more open questions. Stressing that the interviews were confidential and that I would be the only person listening to the tape helped to reassure the participants that they could speak openly.

Perhaps due to the nature of the sample, there were many instances where a young person was absent from school or college when an interview had been arranged, had forgotten to come to the room at an agreed time for the interview, or were unable to attend because they had been excluded, isolated or had to catch up on school or college work missed. All such no shows were successfully rearranged. This continued in subsequent interviews including those post-transition. In total over the course of 94 completed interviews, there were 12 no shows. Compared to previous research this 13% level of no shows appears to be low (e.g. Maguire, 2010).

I tried to keep constant trust, social distance and control across all interviews, yet fully acknowledged that I could not bring every aspect of the interview under control. Where interviewees did not wish to talk about a subject I reminded them

that it was their choice which questions they answered and was pleased they had exercised this rather than experienced discomfort. For instance I often needed to ask participants to explain their answers, given that I was more of an outsider than perhaps I had envisaged. However, employing this interview tactic, of asking for further explanation, encouraged more full answers and was thus used whenever I wished to check I had understood participants' meanings, regardless of my knowledge. Addressing these problems added to the credibility, validity, authenticity and trustworthiness of data collected.

As mentioned above with regard to the low attrition in the current study, participation in second and third interviews led to a financial reward for the young people who took part. Participants in cohort two who were still in school for their second interview were given a £1 high street voucher that could be redeemed at a number of shops. This small reward was intended for participants to buy themselves something like a bar of chocolate, but gave them some choice. A small reward was given as participants were at school and meant to be attending lessons, but was a token of appreciation for their continued participation. Participants who completed an interview post-16, ie after they left school, were given £15 cash for participating. The larger sum was given considering that participants were choosing to be interviewed in their own time, e.g. free periods at college or after work.

Participant incentives are often used in research (Stage & Manning, 2003); however, typically gift certificates are used rather than cash to limit what potentially participants could use the money for. I anticipated that the offer of cash would reduce participant drop out, but took care that participants were not participating only for the money or that the financial reward affected their responses. It transpired that many participants had forgotten about the reward and would have participated regardless. Some participants admitted that the £15 made them more likely to participate. Perhaps the financial incentive meant participants were more likely to offer their free time for interview and attend arranged interviews. For instance, the £15 appeared to motivate Dominic to ride into town on his sister's bicycle to attend his second interview.

Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) highlighted the importance of reflexivity for

sociology, arguing that all sociologists should undertake their research with conscious attention to the effects of their own position, biases, ideas and interests on their work. According to Etherington (2004), being a reflexive researcher is about being aware of what influences our relationship to both the research area and the participants. It also relates to what, during interview, is affecting responses to participant's words.

The importance of scrutinising one's assumptions and values as researcher and examining their impact throughout the research process has been addressed by a number of qualitative researchers (Steier, 1991; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996). Given the research study's alignment to social constructionist and constructivist epistemologies, the accounts of young people were constructed within the context of the interview, rather than as an objective reflection of reality (Burck, 2005). As such I needed to be reflexive in terms of acknowledging that the relationship between I as researcher and young people as the researched affected the data produced.

The ways in which I am positioned as similar and different to the research participants, in relation to class, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation and ability, cannot be ignored alongside the context of the interviews (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996). Being an older (than participants) white, male from the University of Exeter I am sure impacted on the interviews and in the way that I was perceived. In order to minimise these effects, but not eliminate them, I made clear to participants that I was not representing their schools, dressed in a smart-casual manner to dissociate myself from teachers and used vocabulary in keeping with this positioning, for instance referring to 'missing school' or 'mitching' rather than more official terms like 'absence' or 'truancy'.

I acknowledge the subjectivity in the analysis that was undertaken, such that if another researcher was conducting this study the same theoretical findings would not be reached, nor would the same data be produced. However, I was able to draw upon some of the principles of grounded theory in order that the credibility of the interview data and later analysis was enhanced. Through using theoretical sampling I was asking participants about issues emerging from analysis of previous data. Of course the analysis was subjective, however,

maintaining a focus upon the key issues grounded in the data ought to have limited bias within data collection. Likewise not having firm preconceptions on the basis of a preferred sociological theoretical framework meant I interrogated the meaning expressed in data while analysing rather than 'seeing' data as fitting previous research and theory (Glaser, 1978).

#### *Recording interview data*

All interviews were recorded using a digital dictaphone. Participants always gave their permission for this audio recording to occur. Once the interviews were transcribed the audio files were deleted. Given that often over half of what we try to communicate is through non-verbal body language (Mehrabian, 1972), I considered video recording interviews instead of audio recording. While video recording captures a more lasting record of an interview, problems exist with regard to managing the non-verbal information and interpreting this. A video camera can lead to greater intrusion that I thought would both irrevocably affect interviewees and would constrain the potential location of interview (Siedman, 1991). As such audio recording was preferred. This method of data collection does reveal more than just the language of conversations, as pauses, changes in volume and tone can be indicative of meaning. As such in transcription I used many conventions of conversational analysis to capture what was heard beyond the words of the interviews.

Field notes were made during the interviews, often to outline areas I wished to ask about on the basis of what participants were saying and sometimes to note issues that I wanted to revisit later in the interview. These brief field notes made during the interview, therefore, assisted in maintaining the flow of the interview while revisiting important points later and noted observations which would assist when analysing interview data. Field notes made before and after the interview gave focus on the situation, location, behaviour and general impressions that could not be recorded on audio tape. An example of field notes made on an interview schedule is given in appendix VII.

### **3.2.4 Ethical considerations**

The lives and stories that we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared with us (Denzin, 1989, p.83).

Ethics are understandably critical to this research. There was an expectation to conform to ethical guidelines (BERA, 2004; University of Exeter Graduate School of Education, 2008), while the fact that many participants were under 16 when the research commenced, posed additional ethical concerns surrounding the participation of children and the requirement for parental consent (Morrow & Richards, 1996). This study received ethical approval from the University of Exeter Graduate School of Education ethics board. Nevertheless a range of considerations had to be prepared for in order to ensure that this research continued to be ethical and that participation would not be a negative experience for the young people.

Interviews have an ethical dimension; they concern interpersonal interaction and produce information about the human condition and experience. Since they have the potential to cause emotional distress (Stanley & Sieber, 1992), I needed to ensure and clarify informed consent, guarantees of confidentiality and non-maleficence, as a matter of course. I made clear the purpose of the interview and any potential consequences that participation might bring, as it was important to limit how the research itself could potentially harm or even affect the young people participating.

Informed consent was obtained from participants before data collection began (Rust & Gollombok, 1999). Parental consent was necessary for participants who were under the age of 16; however, this was pursued for all participants prior to their first interview, since little age gap existed between those under 16 and those over this age. Participants also typically missed a school lesson to participate in the first interview; as such, parental consent was important from the schools' perspective. One potential participant did not receive parental consent so did not participate, while another chose not to participate themselves.

There was an ethical concern around school practitioners selecting students they felt were hard to reach. Research shows the differential treatment given to labelled children regardless of the expression of the label (e.g. Waterhouse, 2004). While this ethical concern is significant, findings show a more complex form of labelling experienced by some participants. While the label of 'hard to reach' is stigmatising, I decided, with the support of the young people's schools, that participants would not be told they had been identified as 'hard to reach'. I felt revealing the criteria for recruitment would be of no benefit aside from full disclosure and if revealed would likely negatively effect how the participants viewed the research and their participation. Furthermore, this revelation might have caused resentment towards the school, the research and bias attitude towards the school in responses if young people participated with this knowledge. Where necessary I explained to participants that I hoped to interview interesting people and had interviewed young people in the past that had clear career goals and studied five A Levels at College; for this research I wanted to talk to young people with different stories that might not have their futures mapped out. In the final interview I asked some participants why they thought they had been selected, some had no answer, while others suspected it was because they were "naughty" at school.

Although participants were encouraged to share any experiences and feelings that were at all relevant to the research, one cannot be sure what young people are going to reveal about themselves (Wellington & Cole, 2004). Before commencing interviews, the level of confidentiality on offer was clarified, for example regarding any potential disclosures related to breaking the law. Interviews were confidential in the sense that participants were told that they could say whatever they wished. Such unconstrained biographical data holds the potential to cause all manner of ethical problems (Mason, 1996). There are very special circumstances where I would have had to contravene the confidentiality rule and these are where there are clear dangers to participants or others around them. The ethical principles involved here are therefore broader than those involved in conducting scientific research (Mason, 1996). Such instances may have included future plans that would cause harm to themselves or someone else and could be prevented.

### *Other ethical principles*

Young people are often unclear of the meaning of confidentiality (Dines, 1996); however, participants understood that they could say what they wished, withhold information if they chose to and their information be kept private unless anything serious was revealed. Although I chose to transcribe interviews myself as this level of immersion assisted in the analysis that ensued immediately after the transcribing, this personal transcription also meant that no one else would listen to the participants and be able to identify them. Anonymity was important; particularly given that some participants would not have got along with each other because they lived in different towns and spoke of their rivalry with other groups of young people. For instance one participant, Kirsty, even revealed disliking another participant's family when talking about her neighbourhood; as such, discretion was crucial.

Furthermore participants held the right to privacy. Since conversation around biographical information, important, disliked and interesting things, as well as things to be changed, is potentially intimate, embarrassing or sensitive, participants were clearly reminded of the right to withhold information or not answer any question they wished to pass. One participant, Ricky, exercised this option. He said that he did not have a Dad in his first interview and when asked about this said that he would not talk about it. Although intriguing, given that all other participants were very open about their relationships with parents, I did not pry any further or ask him about this in subsequent interviews.

There was also a need to consider whether any data could be shared with schools. Schools were naturally interested in interviews and whether pupils were cooperative. General findings were communicated to those institutions involved in the research as it unfolded, rather than giving feedback on individuals, given that the confidentiality of participants had to be respected. This is important considering that some participants, like James, made direct negative comments about the practitioners who had put them forward for the research.

Participants were given the right to withdraw at any point. This was necessary

and reiterated to participants at various points. The research was longitudinal and it was hoped that participants would participate in three interviews over thirty months. Participation was taken one step at a time. Therefore it was important not to take verbal agreement that a participant would be interviewed as confirming the participant would participate throughout the thirty months of the study or even complete the first interview. Nor were financial incentives dependent on completing three interviews. While participants were told of the general purpose and broad content of the interview in advance, participants may have initially been unprepared for probing questions, the amount that they were encouraged to talk about these subjects and about the personal content of the interview. Participants could withdraw during interviews at any time, which no one did or could choose not to answer any questions, which a few participants did without my questioning this decision.

### *Power*

It is possible in educational research located at schools that the researcher holds power that will therefore affect responses from young people who feel powerless both within the school situation and the research situation which is seen as part of school (Barton, 2006). It is possible that a hierarchy of consent was existent in this study, which may have pressured participation (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Malone, 2003). Headteachers first consented to their school participating and suggested colleagues to approach to discuss young people to participate. These nominated practitioners then located students and perhaps therefore encouraged students to consider the research.

I assumed participants had the autonomy to choose not to participate, indeed one person chose not to, but perhaps they felt pressured, or otherwise they learnt that participation would involve missing a lesson, a reward many seemed pleased to accept. However, in this study I tried to place the balance of power with the participant. They had the power to choose whether they attended an interview, what they wished to divulge or not, whether they completed the interview and, through their responses, controlled how long the interview lasted for. During the first interviews two participants clearly did not engage with the

research. Rather than persevere, I accepted this, assured by the fact that the majority of participants were happy to participate and spoke at length.

The interview's structure meant they could flexibly speak about their interests and meanings with little constraint and no judgement. Beyond the interviews of course, I analysed the data, reconstructing participants' understandings. While credibility and authenticity were goals of the analytical framework employed, the power rested with me to analyse the data. With this power and credibility in mind I conducted member checks after the final analysis to both check and challenge the analysis of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). Two participants who had been interviewed on three occasions met me individually on a further occasion to hear about the main points of the analysis. Both saw that many aspects of the analysis fitted their experience and neither thought any part of the analysis did not fit the post-16 transition experienced by them and their peers.

Do people really understand what they are getting into? (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p288).

The interview structure used also raises ethical considerations. Semi to unstructured interviews may have given participants the impression they had free reign to discuss anything they wish, including their previous experiences. There was little constraint amongst interview topics. However the conversation was guided by the goals of the interview, and in second and third interviews by existing analytical concepts and categories, in order to subtly steer focus back to 'topic' as appropriate (Kvale, 1996). This poses ethical issues, as interviewees might have believed they had the control to speak as they wish, or were participating in a conversation, but in fact these conversations were purposeful, with all participants speaking about some similar issues according to the goals of the interview and the theoretical sampling employed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

What could be considered data was clarified ahead of data collection. As I made field notes when I initially met participants, I was recording data before interviews began. Everything that was transcribed verbatim from interviews was considered data that could be used both for analysis and quoted within the

findings chapters. Other data could be analysed but not claimed as illustrative in the same way, unless the dictaphone was stopped at the participant's request, at which point I intended that no data would have been collected. Only one participant asked for the dictaphone to be stopped, seemingly they did not trust the dictaphone, although they did not mind me recording data by making notes on the secret they wished to divulge unrecorded.

Ethical concerns do not rest only with data collection and the writing of this thesis though; consent was gained from participants for the potential publication of interview data when participants were interviewed a second time. Participants in social science research have a right to expect that information they provide will be treated confidentially and, if published, will not be identifiable as their own (BPS, 2008). Likewise there is a purely pragmatic argument for guaranteeing the anonymity of participants. If I used real names, then others would be unlikely to volunteer for research participation in future (Coolican, 2004). Participants were invited to forward their own pseudonym during the first interview, some created a name, but the vast majority were content for me to choose a name for them<sup>1</sup>. Nonetheless some biographical detail provided in the narrative cases in the forthcoming analysis chapters is specific and unique, although highly relevant as it demonstrates the challenges facing some young people. I have been careful not to reveal more than is necessary, renaming people and places, nonetheless it is worth bearing in mind that there can be no absolute guarantee of total anonymity in qualitative social research (Cohen et al., 2000).

One might question the ethics of considering which pupils are hard to reach and investigating why they seem to be hard to reach, only not to intervene at the time. No positive action is taken with regard to the participants beyond what they decide for themselves. While this ensures the fairness, neutrality and confidentiality of the study and is ethical in the sense that participation does not change participants and protects them from reasonable harm, this might not be putting participants' best interests at heart.

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix VIII for details of participants included within analysis presented and their pseudonyms.

For example, I did not tell Amanda's school that she experienced incidents of bullying that she chose not to report, since she considered that teachers would not take any action. I did not pass on any of the plentiful constructive criticism as to how particular teacher's lessons could be improved, even though this might have benefitted those beyond the research. Likewise I did not reveal to schools how the young people clearly "played" the discipline systems in place. In a similar vein, despite knowledge of Further Education in the study area, I did not offer any advice, even though I could have done. Beneficence has to be set aside in order to respect the confidentiality of participants and not to interfere with their lives. I was clear from the outset that this research aimed to find out about young people; it was not action research focussed upon the school setting, intended to assist or improve the young people or lead to specific changes at their schools. I do not believe participants would have been so open and honest or as likely to participate if this were the case. If the theoretical understanding reached in the next chapters can inform wider understanding of the post-16 transitions experienced by young people, this study has the potential to impact those beyond the young people and schools who participated here.

### **3.2.5 Analytical Framework**

I end this chapter with the analytical framework employed to move from the interview data collected from participants to interpretation. This is undertaken here for several reasons; firstly, it allows for the following two chapters to focus on the findings and discussing the interpretations and theorising of each analytical theme. In the first part of this chapter it was noted that grounded theory offers coterminous data collection, analysis and theorising (Wiener, 2007). I have alluded several times that analysis began soon after each interview and that this analysis informed the theoretical sampling which is primarily a methodological concern.

Just as interpretive methodologies can and have been adapted to fit the demands of this study, so too have interpretive analytical frameworks been used flexibly according to the needs of particular studies (e.g. Cutcliffe, 2005).

The analytical framework described draws upon grounded theory, narrative inquiry and case study which have all been mentioned earlier. Alongside the actual process of analysis I also made decisions in terms of how to display the findings in the next two chapters; with this in mind I discuss thematic analysis below, which was used primarily as a tool to organise the findings.

I employed several analytical features typically seen in grounded theory studies. I developed analytical categories as story lines (Omar et al., 2010), such that analysis would allow findings to be described in a narrative form (Scott, 2008). A critical aspect of the storyline and the analysis as a whole, is the inclusion of much verbatim data, 'providing ample verbatim material "grounds" ... abstract analysis and lays a foundation for making claims about it' (Charmaz, 2006, p. 82).

As mentioned previously more post-positivist grounded theory analytical frameworks, such as Glaser's (1978) and Strauss and Corbin's (1990) have been criticised for being both overly complex and too rigid (Robrecht, 1995). Hence I draw upon procedures documented by Eaves (2001), Chesler (1988), Schatzman (1991) and Charmaz, (2000) as they could be applied to this constructivist longitudinal study and importantly give useable analytic strategies that have assisted my analysis particularly when confronted by a mass of data in the latter stages of this project. Although these strategies remain faithful to grounded theory, they have been selected according to the flexibility they offer (Burns, 1989), allowing flexible, theoretical interpretation which remains authentic to the data.

I transcribed all the interviews verbatim. This differs from the view of Strauss and Corbin (1990), who suggest transcribing only 'as much as is needed' (p. 30). Transcription, although very time consuming, aided my knowledge of the whole data before the act of coding fragments an interview transcript. Through undertaking the transcription myself, I came to know the data well and was able to compare and categorise interviewees descriptively. Although this is not central to an interpretative analysis, exhausting descriptive categorisation early is an aid to theoretical sensitivity as I then looked beyond these types of categories when analysing further (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). My theoretical

sensitivity was also increased by reading through an interview a couple of times before open coding; this increases contextual knowledge of subsequently coded fragments of data.

### *Coding*

When open coding the first interviews I employed a three pronged approach, whereby simple codes were made in the left hand margin of transcripts describing and labelling the particular piece of data. Secondly key terms within the interview were highlighted. Abstracting in vivo codes from the language of the participants is a tactic other grounded theorists have suggested and used (e.g. Chesler, 1987), while others believe this merely summarises rather than conceptualises data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Recognising the analytically salient terms actually used by participants ensured that the meanings of the participants were heard, during analysis and beyond (Punch, 2005). Finally I wrote more theoretical codes under extracts of participants' responses. This was less frequent than the open codes made throughout. Including theoretical codes as relevant from the outset forced the analysis to take an interpretative lens throughout. An example of this coding of an interview transcript is located in Appendix IX.

As open coding continued, forthcoming data was compared with coding already undertaken as per the constant comparative method (Bowen, 2006). Similarities and differences across participants were interrogated from the outset. Such constant comparison assisted the next analytical step which involved looking across the codes within an entire cohort of participants to reduce these codes into a smaller number of concepts. In doing so I checked the data to ensure the codes falling within a concept did fit together. I also identified any pertinent illustrations of the concept in the data, where participants had said things that particularly fit that concept (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). By the end of analysis of the first round of interviews I had moved from a multitude of codes to fewer. Concepts were noted separately for the two cohorts of participants, although many overlapped.

Data analysis is like a discussion between the actual data, the created theory,

the memos and the researcher (Backman & Kyngäs, 1999, p. 149).

Various grounded theorists agree upon the need to write memos throughout the analytical process. Memos are written explorations of ideas about the data, codes, categories, and theory (Charmaz 1983). In this study memos served the purpose of interpreting data, articulating metaphors, examining the relationships among codes, concepts and categories, explaining major code categories, exploring methodological issues and generating the storyline in order to write up the findings (Eaves, 2001). Glaser suggests, 'one should always interrupt coding to write memos' (1978, p.55). There were no boundaries placed on what I included within a memo; indeed, my memos served as entries in research diaries as well as containing exploration of the analysis (Chesler, 1987). Memos became more important during analysis of the second and third interviews, as they provided the bridge between data and the developing theoretical understanding, as well as documenting how and why key categories were emerging (Chesler, 1987). An example of a memo used is located in Appendix X.

Do not understand me too quickly (Mailer, 1992, p.264).

More of an analytical discussion could take place after the second interviews, since cohort one were living their post-16 lives. Data from the second round of interviewing was subject to the same procedure of open coding previously described. However, constant comparison now involved particular comparison between a participant's current interview and their first interview. Coding also proceeded more quickly as previous codes already existed that some data would fit. Other data gave new codes and showed that existing concepts did not hold for the second round of interviews. Particular comparison was made between the concepts arising from cohort two now in their final year of school and the concepts from cohort one's first interviews held a year earlier when they were at the same stage of their transition. Memos were used to note which concepts were holding across cohorts and the three points over the transition now sampled (Year 10-11 and Year 11-12 across the two cohorts), as well as discussing the process of transition now evident.

After the third and final round of interviewing the same procedure of open coding again took place. Any emerging concepts and categories were

compared to previous analysis to see where they might fit. If they were new then comparison was made to previous data to investigate whether these new concepts and categories may have been missed, or if they were unique and perhaps indicative of young people further along their post-16 transition. This meant the concept of constant comparison was all the more important, perusing previous and incoming data in order to refine and finalise the key categories. 'Since sensitivity usually increases with time' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 181), recoding previously collected data, particularly in light of seemingly new categories revealed further comparisons, legitimately missed under first analysis.

The post-positivist grounded theory texts generally consider axial coding as the next step en route to building a Grounded Theory. Axial coding involves connecting categories revealed during open coding (Boeije, 2009). However, axial coding is often complicated (Scott & Howell, 2008), therefore I used dimensional analysis proposed by Schatzman (1991) to relate and consider the overlap between different categories. Theoretical sampling continued as I tested the patterns revealed by the analysis using the rich data already collected, rather than necessitating more data collection.

My grounded theory analysis did not strive to name a core category that encapsulates and relates the main categories revealed by analysis. This differs from stricter grounded theory analysis (e.g. Glaser, 1992). Instead of this arbitrary type of selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the final steps of analysis were focussed upon understanding the main categories of analysis and investigating the extent to which they held across participants. Final analysis also more directly compared all participants, regardless of their particular cohort or post-16 destination. This led to particular participants being identified as apposite examples of individual categories. Rather than try to force categories under a superordinate core category, I sought an organisation of key categories under several themes which could then be logically presented in the forthcoming analysis chapters. This is in keeping with similar research in the field (e.g. Ball et al., 2000) and allows for an engaging narrative to be written that incorporates all of the key findings.

Atkins' (2009) work was discussed in the previous chapter and presented data in a narrative form. Narrative analysis is often descriptive as it presents participants' stories (Kane, 2004). However, narratives have been used in interpretative post-16 transition research (e.g. Ball et al., 2000; Lawy, 2002; MacDonald & Marsh, 2001). Where used in previous research, narratives aid in illuminating the interpretations made, providing evidence, often in young people's verbatim words, for the theoretical analysis given. Atkins' (2009) use of narrative was to provide the story of the experience of young people upon particular courses in particular colleges. On the other hand, Ball et al.'s (2000) use of narratives of particular participants allowed for an appreciation of participant's backgrounds and the part this plays in shaping young people's experiences. Unlike Atkins, the narratives provided by Ball et al. also effectively demonstrate the similarities and differences amongst young people. It is in a similar vein that I use narratives from participants to highlight the constant comparative analysis, used to show similarities and differences in young people's experiences.

The analysis and narratives therein are presented under four themes in the next two chapters. As such I drew upon thematic analysis, particularly in the style of presentation of the findings. Thematic analysis is a broad analytical technique referring to the move from open coding of qualitative data to a small number of themes that highlight the main findings of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While the coding and analysis I employed drew upon grounded theory and other analytical frameworks, rather than thematic analysis techniques (Attride-Stirling, 2001) per se, presenting the key findings under four themes as per thematic analysis, allows for the key analytic categories to be included in the discussion of the analysis. Verbatim extracts from interviews are included in the analysis to exemplify the themes and explore the variation across participants within the theme, that is, constant comparison. Rather than rigidly attempt to reach an authentic grounded theory which would have one core category (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), the more flexible presentation of the findings under themes allows for a range of interpretations and theoretical understandings to be discussed in the next two chapters.

### **3.3 Summary**

In this chapter the current study was situated paradigmatically as nominalist, constructivist and interpretivist. Grounded theory has been justified as the most appropriate interpretative methodology to explore the experiences and meanings of young people over the post-16 transition. Yet grounded theory and other allied interpretive methodologies were applied flexibly to the needs of the study, particularly the longitudinal data collection necessary in order to capture the post-16 transition over time. The research questions and the theoretical framework employed meant interviews were the method chosen to capture the experiences and meanings of young people identified by school practitioners as hard to reach and to allow these young people's voices to be heard. Three rounds of interviews were conducted with two cohorts of young people, with theoretical sampling reducing the number of interviewees over time and refining the ongoing analysis in order to reach a theoretical understanding after conducting 94 interviews.

## **Chapter four**

### **4. Findings part I**

This is the first of two chapters where I present my findings and analysis. The analysis and discussion are presented according to thematic analysis, with the findings organised under four themes. Two of these, *school and learning identities* and *imagined futures*, are presented in this chapter. In chapter five I consider more structural concepts related to transformation and choice. I begin this chapter by considering an issue inherent to the research, that of labelling.

As indicated in chapter three, a total of 94 interviews were completed with 51 young people, 14 of whom were interviewed three times. In these two chapters I have focused on 11 of those young people who represent the diversity of the sample with different stories to tell. The extracts from narratives are presented verbatim and I have drawn upon conventions from conversational analysis (see appendix XI) used to show, for example, pauses and laughter.

#### **Part 1**

##### **4.1 Being hard to reach – a label**

Labelling is an issue that was always going to be central to the current research. Because of the way I constructed the research and recruited participants, the label 'hard to reach' and the characteristics of the sample needed to be considered as part of the analysis. This issue is not an analytical theme in the sense that my analytical framework led to labelling or being hard to reach revealing themselves as important issues across the data, rather it was important to consider the characteristics of the young people ahead of discussing analytical themes drawn from their experiences and meanings and to explore whether labelling and/or their identification as 'hard to reach' was a pervasive issue for these young people.

In chapter 2 I summarised some of the theorising of labelling. A label typically defines an individual according to a characteristic deemed by the majority or

those in power. Often a stigma, the label can encourage others to focus upon the characteristic rather than any reasons behind it. This process of labelling can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy where the individual begins to accept the label as a key part of their self-concept. This is potentially critical to the current study as practitioners were asked to label young people who could potentially participate. However, the identification of 'hard to reach' young people was a starting point for the research. Labelling according to the classic theorising outlined above was not assumed to apply to the young people and as discussed in chapter two this view of labelling has not been without criticism. Indeed, as I show later, no ramifications in terms of inequality or a self-fulfilling prophecy was evident as a result of selection for the study. However, young people's interview transcripts showed that they were aware that labelling was a part of everyday life.

#### **4.1.1 Being hard to reach?**

Firstly I consider labelling as it relates to my use of the flexible, non-pejorative term 'hard to reach' rather than any one of a myriad of similar labels that are regularly used in the literature (Steer, 2000), such as disaffected, disengaged, behavioural problems, at risk, marginalised etcetera. 'Hard to reach' was defined for the purposes of practitioners selecting Year 10 and Year 11 pupils to participate as those young people who were not reaching their potential and unlikely to make a positive progression beyond school, as outlined in the previous chapter.

Hard to reach is an 'umbrella term' allowing for flexibility that neither assumes blame, nor assumes the outcome of young people's varied experiences at the periphery of participation. Previous research recognises that hard to reach young people are heterogenous, with individuals labelled as such representing diverse backgrounds (Milbourne, 2007). It encapsulates that the participants of this study may be difficult to engage with educationally and/or for research and that there is some implied persistence of this condition, that is, they will remain hard to reach without tailored intervention aimed at what makes it hard to reach these young people.

An issue with the inherent flexibility and lack of judgement in the choice of term hard to reach, is that less is known about the characteristics, experiences and understandings of those who have been prescribed with this term. Brackertz (2007) assumes that hard to reach refers to those that do not participate or are less likely to do so; by association, it typically refers to hidden populations and minorities (Boag-Munroe, 2009), those that we know least about. While mindful of the fact that practitioners chose who they thought were hard to reach, this section initially explores what such a label might mean in terms of similarities and differences across a group of young people identified as such by school practitioners.

I compare the characteristics of young people in the current study and young people in the literature who have been identified according to other similar terms such as disaffected or disengaged. For Attwood et al. (2003) disaffected young people are often socially excluded, poor attenders, put off by the academic curriculum and lacking in agency. However, Solomon and Rogers (2001) argue that disaffection is a complex phenomenon that is influenced by numerous interrelating factors and can be manifested in various ways including disengagement.

Four broad characteristics were evident amongst many participants' interview transcripts, with truancy, behavioural problems, disaffection and exclusion being typical characteristics for those young people that practitioners considered not to be reaching their potential and unlikely to make a 'positive' progression post-16. Primarily these characteristics are considered here in order to present an understanding of the school lives of the young people who participated as a basis and ahead of the thematic analysis in further sections. It was also clear that these experiences were an important part of how young people constructed their school experiences.

### *Attendance and truancy*

Unauthorised absence and truancy remains a significant problem in UK secondary education (Reid, 2008a). Managing pupil attendance is considered an increasingly complex and demanding social issue (*ibid.*). Reid (2002) reported a survey revealing that 30% of pupils in their last two years of secondary education said they had truanted at least once in the previous half term, with 10% truanting at least once per week. The impact of truancy is wide-ranging with truants found to have lower academic self-concepts, lower self-esteem, greater marginalisation, higher levels of neuroticism and anti-social behaviour than the normal school-age population (Reid, 1999). Researchers also recognise that while certain factors may predict truancy, the act of truancy also impacts other aspects of young people's lives (Reid, 2008b).

Reid (2000) differentiates between unauthorised absence from school and skipping of particular lessons, with the latter giving schools equal cause for concern, while being underestimated in formal attendance records. Both types of truancy were seen across the participants in the current study. Since starting at her new school in Year 10, Jennifer often missed both lessons and days of school:

*Once I went shopping and then there was another day I walked like five miles with my mates Tiegan and Anna to Newton Maverick. We did go back to school that day but it wasn't til about lunchtime.*

*[...] I don't think there was a week where I wouldn't miss at least two days of school (Jennifer, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

While a recognised link exists between truancy and disaffection (e.g. Charlton, Panting & Willis, 2004), participants' reasons for why they missed school belied disaffection as a blanket reason for truancy. For Jennifer motives were mixed:

*Part of me wanted to rebel, against the school and my Mum. And it's like cos I really struggle with coursework and I ask teachers to help me but then they're like yeah yeah sure, 'course and when I go to them to help me at lunchtime or after school they're not there, so I sort of just give up in the end (Jennifer, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

Other young people deliberately missed particular lessons. Chloe avoided her English lessons:

*I haven't really been to English this year. I don't go. I hate it. I can't concentrate I can't sit there, say she's like you have an hour to write an essay and I sit there like that [stoic]*

*[...] I don't know how to write an essay (Chloe, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

Unlike other participants though, her truancy went beyond dislike for a subject or teacher, with ability playing a part.

Finally Kurt demonstrates another reason that young people truant, due to his experience of bullying. This demonstrates again that while a number of participants held low attendance in common, their reasons were varied:

*I wasn't coming to school because of it, because of the fact that I used to get bullied about it and then my attendance was bad because of it, because I never used to come and then my Dad used to get fines for my attendance, so I started coming to school again (Kurt, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

The differing reasons for truancy given by participants which included disaffection, issues outside of school, achievement and bullying match those that have been reported elsewhere in the literature (Reid, 2002; Charlton, Panting & Willis, 2004; House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2007).

### *Behavioural problems*

A second characteristic shared by the majority of the participants was one of 'behavioural problems'. 'Behavioural problems' is the term most frequently used in the literature to refer to issues of behaviour in education (e.g. Daniels & Edwards, 2004; Babu, Raju & Rao, 2008; Andreou & Rapti, 2010), therefore I use the term despite the underlying issue that it carries with it the risk of pathologising individuals as the problem, rather than considering the reasons behind what policy and practice consider problematic behaviour (Waterhouse, 2004). Whether their behaviour was a 'problem' is an issue beyond the focus of this study.

Certainly the young people recognised in themselves examples of 'bad' behaviour and, when questioned about this many had assumed that was the reason they were included in the research. For instance James explained that he was poorly behaved throughout secondary school:

*I started off as a bit of a little beep in Year 7, I've got like a bit of a bad name, cos if there's trouble I always get blamed.*

*[...] I don't see the point really in just sitting there and being quiet and getting on with all your work cos you wont have any friends and you'll just be known as a boffin, you'll get a lot of stick and you can do just quite as well as someone else could, its just whether you're smart enough and whether or not you do the work. Nothing to do with your behaviour really, if you ask me (James, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

The possible evidence of labelling that can be seen in the above interview extract is considered in more detail later in this section. Kevin also exhibited challenging behaviour in school:

*I'm not allowed my lunchtimes I've got to go in Mrs Haynes room all lunchtime for my lunch and not allowed out. But its good cos I'm keeping out of trouble.*

*[...] I got into trouble loads of times for fighting, at College I headbutted someone cos they were having a go at me and taking the piss out my Mum. He tried riding over me on his pushbike, I pushed him off his bike and headbutted him (Kevin, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

As was seen amongst Willis' (1977) lads, young people in the current study also played the disciplinary system designed to encourage good behaviour at school:

*Childish behaviour that sort of thing, I admit to that. Showing off in front of friends, that sort of thing, getting sent out of lessons. Chucking things around the room sort of thing. Sounds really petty but ... just to get sent out at the same time as friends, they were like I'll see you in time out room in twenty minutes sort of thing (Ricky, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Breaking rules at school is perhaps the one thing that more of the young people held in common with one another than any other in the current study. The narratives above indicate that their behaviour varied both in terms of what they did and their reasons for this. Disciplinary systems rarely seemed to affect young people's decisions to act in the way that they did, with evidence that young people often circumvented and played these systems.

### *Disaffection*

Disaffection with school was felt by the majority of participants. The young people had varied reasons for their dislike of school; Dominic, who attended a Pupil Referral Unit said he always felt this way:

*I didn't like school from the start, ever since primary school I hated it ... I'd just rather be outside, don't like being inside, I hate being inside (Dominic, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Zara was looking forward to the end of school:

*I really don't enjoy school at all ... I'd rather not be in lessons. The only bit I like is seeing my friends ... I can't wait to get out of here [school] really, to do what I want, find a job (Zara, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Other young people did not appear to have been as persistently disaffected as Dominic and Zara; Kirsty, who was typical of many other participants, felt like she had outgrown school:

*Obviously my GCSEs is important to me, but the last two years I just can't stand it ... I'm just getting bored of being here. Same teachers ... it's just that I can't take it no more, they're just doing my head in (Kirsty, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Some of the young people related their disaffection to relationships with teachers:

*The teachers are all evil here, none of them like piercings so they pick on you (Kurt, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

For others it was school lessons that they did not enjoy:

*All the lessons are boring, especially now we're meant to be going over things for exams, it's just making notes and answering questions all the time, every lesson (Bethany, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Interestingly though, some participant's narratives showed that particular lessons or teachers were disliked whereas others were liked:

*Miss Jacobs, I can't handle her. She moves me as soon I go in there, she says you sit next to someone I don't like and like oh I sit there and then*

*like the whole class is talking and I open my mouth once, she'll be like go to time out.*

*[...] Mr Hargreaves is nice, you can get on with him. He can like, I wont say take a joke, but he understands if you know what I mean (.) and you don't mind doing work for him as well, cos he lets you do other stuff which is fun, as well as do a lot of work (Jonathan, 2/3, 2009, Year 11).*

*Probably Science is the worst cos it just makes me fall asleep ... I dunno, probably cos just writing stuff all the time and most of the time you're not doing any fun stuff like we used to do, back in the other years in Science, just sitting there writing stuff, copying stuff off the board and that.*

*[...] I like art cos like it's just really chilled out and you just sit down and do your work. And she lets you talk to your mates cos when you're like painting and that you do [talk] and so it's pretty good (Imogen, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

Therefore it was often the case that disaffection was not felt by young people across the board as a blanket response to all lessons, pointing to a problem with the use of this term, where it is assumed to refer to a multi-faceted dislike of school (e.g. McNamara, 1998; Solomon and Rogers, 2001).

### *Exclusion*

The fourth and final characteristic seen across a number of young people was experiences of exclusion. Authors such as Holroyd and Armour (2003), Stone (2000) and Kinder (1999) consider exclusion, or risk thereof, as a characteristic of disaffection. Exclusion may range from permanent expulsion from school to temporary exclusion from particular lessons. This range was also seen across the young people in the current research:

*I was kicked out of Perri High in Year 9 ... That's when I got permanently excluded. I had had loads of exclusions and that for things like behaviour, violence and all stuff like that ... I didn't want to be in a mainstream school anymore (Dominic, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

*Most teachers if you're not doing any work then they send you out, send you to time out' (Jasmin, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Dominic was unique amongst the participants interviewed on several occasions in that he was permanently excluded from secondary school and then attended

a Pupil Referral Unit. Several other participants described how they were at risk of permanent exclusion. For instance, Chloe was often in trouble at school, frequently skipping lessons and had been warned regarding permanent exclusion:

*I just get into trouble all the time, like I was in internal exclusion for three lessons then got into my fourth lesson and got buddied out for laughing. [...] I just don't go ... Sometimes I mitch with other people, but I'm getting into loads of shit about that now ... Miss Babb printed off these documents about my behaviour and my attendance, she was like right this is your final warning now, so if I'm naughty or if I mitch one more time I've got to have a meeting with the Governors, and she says she's got enough evidence to permanently exclude me (Chloe, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

The interview extracts presented above clearly demonstrate that behavioural problems and attendance in particular can lead to exclusion, suggesting that exclusion may be a potential outcome of the other characteristics described above. This link is also recognised in the literature (Gray, Miller & Noakes, 1994). However, much literature and research recommends alternatives to exclusion as a response to challenging behaviour (e.g. Reed, 2005; Stead, Lloyd & Kendrick, 2004). It is worth bearing in mind that many participants in the current study were seemingly identified as hard to reach because of behavioural problems, without being at risk of exclusion, indicating the heterogeneity amongst these young people who were all considered hard to reach by practitioners.

More often than being at risk of permanent exclusion, participants recounted how they were excluded from lessons after particular incidents and, particularly in the final year of school, how they were no longer attending some of their subjects. For instance when interviewed for the first time in her final year of school, Zara was only taking four of her GCSEs<sup>1</sup>, having left or been removed from the remainder:

*I think I'm doing Maths, English, Science and RE, but that's it ... I've been chucked out of [HHH] quite a few. I used to go to College, one day a week, so that was additional studies, but I got chucked out of that and then I done Childcare, but I quit that and then I done PE Studies but got chucked*

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of young people in England and Wales complete between 9 and 11 GCSE qualifications.

*out of that and I don't do Maths cos I've been chucked out but I've still got to do the exam (Zara, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Across these lessons Zara gave a variety of reasons for being removed, from disaffection in PE to conflict with her Maths teacher:

*I just didn't like PE, there was quite a few of us that got chucked out and we were just like chatting all the time.*

*[...] me and the Maths teacher don't get along ... he just refused to teach me (Zara, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Steedman and Stoney (2004) noted within their review of disengagement among 14- to 16-year-olds that such drop out of some GCSE subjects or reduced timetables is relatively commonplace. Steedman and Stoney write about the types of disengagement experienced and the resultant 'failure' of disengaged young people to acquire 'the 5 GCSE A\*-C benchmark' (2004, p. 7), this assumes that young people on reduced timetables are disengaged and that the problem lies with the individual who is resisting the norms (see Reid, 1999). Reid (1999) prefers terminology that refers more to attitudes, values and behaviour, thus acknowledging the individual's agency and its interaction with surrounding structure (issues I return to in the next chapter). After all, both Zara and Jonathan say that they were '*kicked out*' (Zara, Jonathan, Year 11) of subjects, implying an element of marginalisation (Lovey, 2000), rather than a decision to disengage. However, their behavioural problems blur this distinction between exclusion and disengagement (Steer, 2000).

The appearance of the four characteristics, truancy, behavioural problems, disaffection and exclusion across participants points to the utility of the use of the term hard to reach to recruit the young people in the current study. As evidenced above several of the synonyms commonly used in the literature such as disaffected and disruptive (Steer, 2000) fit characteristics of the young people. Furthermore, the narratives presented demonstrate that these four characteristics of hard to reach are often inter-related. For instance Chloe who was discussed above was at risk of permanent exclusion, had low attendance related to disaffection with a certain lesson and was behaviourally challenging.

While the participants shared many characteristics, they were not a homogenous group. Just as Milbourne (2007) recognised that hard to reach

groups include heterogeneous individuals, in this study young people who shared characteristics like truancy held different reasons for this and the behavioural problems displayed by the majority of participants ranged from aggressive acts, to deliberate disruption, to too much talking. Indeed, 'hard to reach' was a label applied in order to select participants for the research, chosen deliberately as a flexible term to allow for diversity amongst the sample. That the participants were all considered 'hard to reach' at one time is of less relevance than the experiences and behaviour evident above and the wider issue of labelling considered below.

#### **4.1.2 Experiences beyond school**

Thus far I have considered the school-based characteristics shared by the young people identified as hard to reach. The four characteristics shared across participants may suggest why school practitioners considered these young people hard to reach. But, as mentioned previously, it is rarely found to be the case that issues like disaffection are particular to school (Gottfredson, 2001), therefore in this subsection I consider the characteristics shared by participants outside of education. It is of relevance to the above discussion and later analysis, given that theorists typically consider experiences outside of school to impact attitudes and behaviour in school and vice versa (Burfeind, Burfeind & Bartusch, 2010).

Although infrequent, previous literature has considered what it assumes to be the causes of disaffection. While more typically authors like Kinder and Wilken (1998) consider causes within school, such as the curriculum, Holroyd and Armour (2003) consider some of the causes of disaffection beyond school, giving low self-esteem, poverty, broken families, drug use, unemployment and involvement in crime as examples of causes of disaffection. While such determinism in ascribing causal factors to disaffection has been understandably criticised (e.g. Merton & Parrott, 1999), Holroyd and Armour (2003) do argue that research suggests disaffection is the outcome of multiple, interrelated causes. It is of interest that many participants in the current study revealed

backgrounds and experiences that matched the factors of disaffection that Holroyd and Armour (2003) listed.

Dominic was one of several participants who had a criminal record:

*Sometimes I just feel get the feeling of like I just want to get nicked today. I dunno what causes it if you know what I mean. It's weird (Dominic, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Prior to his first interview he had been on an Acceptable Behaviour Contract<sup>1</sup>, an order often issued by police in which the individual agrees that they will not repeat a previous antisocial behaviour in future. The contract encourages young to take more ownership of and responsibility for their own actions:

*Everyone was put on this order now, me and my mates and that. Me and my mates we can't drink in a public place and all that crap, like not under the influence of drugs or with drugs or stuff. And if you do it you're sent back to court ... I'm off mine now I think, they've still got another two months to go (Dominic, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

The majority of participants had been in trouble with the police, several recounting how they had been 'taken home' (Kurt, Year 11; Chloe, Year 11) by police when drunk. While drinking was often considered to be commonplace for young people their age by the majority of participants, Chloe also drunk during the week:

*It's just me really.  
[...] I just nick it from the house and like this Saturday was the vodka cos I sometimes bring vodka into school but I don't get caught, I pour the vodka into like a fruit shoot clear bottle and they think its water ... I don't tell anyone that I have it at school. I dunno, it doesn't make me so stressed out (Chloe, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

The use of drugs appeared to be less common than drinking. Although this was true for most participants, Jonathan was different in that he had used drugs since eleven years of age:

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<sup>1</sup> An ABC is a voluntary written agreement between a young person, usually aged between 10 and 18, and the local authority and police. It is not legally binding but, if breached, can be used as evidence if enforcement action needs to be taken through the courts. Serious breaches may lead to an application for an Anti-Social Behaviour Order.

*Started from just before Year 7. Just from like seeing older people doing it and then well when you get offered it's not like really no, you're not going to turn it down ... cos it's like what would I say and like they'd call you a weak and a pussy and all that and then, you think about that and say yeah and then from then I just carried on.*

*[...] [At the time of his first interview] I do smoke weed and that, but not as much as I smoked up there [where lived ], I used to steal and like stuff like that to get it up there (Jonathan, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Jonathan had experienced some difficult circumstances during his childhood, going beyond the broken families that were typical of the vast majority of participants and were mentioned as a cause of disaffection by Holroyd and Armour (2003). Jonathan's Mum died when he was born and his Dad spent many years in prison for murdering his four year old sister soon after this:

*Oh well my Mum died, well my Mum was in a coma when I was born, I was like caesarean. And then my Dad got put in prison cos he like murdered my sister, yeah and then I've never seen my Dad or nothing (Jonathan, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

His grandmother brought him up from this point:

*I had nowhere else to go. There aint none of my other family up in Middleham who wanted me (Jonathan, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

While Jonathan's upbringing was extreme, more typical was Jennifer's experience along with 92% of participant's whose parents were separated or divorced:

*My Dad and my Mum are always at war with each other, always having arguments. Even though Mum and Dad are divorced and they don't even live together, they have arguments all the time (Jennifer, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

Related to broken families, James and his father had a troubled relationship:

*He would always like shout at me, but he sometimes got a bit physical, but I wasn't really worrying about that.*

*[...] He used to be like a right beep to everyone really and I was the only one who stood up for everyone and I used to say like what are you doing that for its out of order and then he always used to have a thing against me (James, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

The above examples from young people's narratives show similarity to Holroyd and Armour's (2003) factors related to disaffection, with broken families, drinking, drug use and crime all evident amongst my sample. As indicated above though, I do not assume these factors to cause any of the four in-school characteristics discussed previously. Several characteristics were shared by young people that Holroyd and Armour (2003) did not account for amongst their causes of disaffection. One such experience was relocating. Jennifer did not move very far geographically, but her experience demonstrates the potential significance of moving that relates to the other factors of family breakdown and self-esteem. After suffering abuse at the hands of her boyfriend, Jennifer's Mother moved into a refuge with Jennifer and her brother midway through 2007:

*My Mum and her boyfriend were always having arguments and then he was getting really violent and we had to move away to a women's refuge. [...] It was grim, it was like everyone was always depressed and people crying and you'd see people come in that had been beaten up and everything so it wasn't very nice. There was little kids as well, there wasn't really much for them ... We had to have a room no bigger than this to share [small interview room]. I was just depressed all the time. It was like I didn't want to eat you know. I wasn't happy (Jennifer 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

Holroyd and Armour also fail to acknowledge the impact of broken peer groups and bullying amongst their factors:

*I don't talk to no kids now, the only friend I did have was Mike and he's gone back up Fraceston (Kevin, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

*They reacted more when they found out that it actually was true that I was gay ... shouting abuse at me like 'faggot' and stuff like that (Kurt, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

#### *Out of school impacts school*

The experiences and backgrounds of the hard to reach young people range from activities that these young people seemingly choose to engage in, to disadvantage that is outside the control of the individual. While these factors mirror many of those outlined in the literature, the current study can extend Holroyd and Armour (2003), since participants recognised that their situations

outside of education impacted their school lives (Solomon & Rogers, 2001). Previous literature has typically identified how particular experiences out of school impact young people's experience of their education, for example delinquency affecting school behaviour in a reciprocal manner (Burfeind et al., 2010); here I show that a range of external factors can all impact education, sometimes in a cumulative manner.

James' troubled relationship with his father led to him moving out while he was in Year 10, which he described having an impact on school:

*I couldn't get my books, I never did homework or anything like that ... I wasn't really very keen, I was never eating that much really. Cos it wasn't the nicest of houses I stayed at, cos it was just me and him [friend whose house James stayed at]. And he's like nineteen and then, dunno just got really quite rough ... I didn't care, I didn't even want to go to school anymore. Especially when he's there, he doesn't work and he's on the dole and that and living without paying. (James, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Jennifer's six months spent living in a refuge also affected school for her:

*I was just depressed all the time. It was like I didn't want to eat you know. I wasn't really happy. It sort of affected schoolwork cos I couldn't concentrate on my lessons. And like my mood swings were really bad as well ... I think it was because I was always fed up of being in that environment, in that situation. I just thought you know, I don't want to be there and like school's not making me feel any better. So you know. (Jennifer, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

Although drinking and drug use primarily occurred outside of school at the weekends for the majority of young people partaking in this, for some individuals it impacted school:

*I dunno its weird, when I'm smoking weed I think it just, I dunno, it fucks you up so much if you know what I mean. One day it'll be alright, the next day you just don't want to do nothing and the next day you can be on the biggest hyper going. I don't know it just makes you go round a bit ... yeah sometimes I'd smoke before coming in here [Pupil Referral Unit], but then up til a few weeks ago I was smoking weed all the time (Dominic, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

For Kurt his experience of bullying impacted school, as it was blamed for his low attendance in the final years of school:

*I wasn't coming to school because of it [being gay], because of the fact that I used to get bullied about it and then my attendance was bad because of it, because I never used to come and then my Dad used to get fines for my attendance, so I had to start coming to school again.*

*[...] I've missed so much, like in English I've missed the whole of Shakespeare and another book, so I'm going to have problems in the exam (Kurt, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Issues regarding the background of the young people participating, or the structures imposed on them, along with their ability to negotiate their lives within these structures is considered further and theoretically as part of the fifth theme, *restricted choice, structure and agency*, presented in the next chapter.

#### **4.1.3 Did the young people experience labelling?**

Earlier in the introduction to this section I recognised that labelling was an overarching issue for this research and one that needed addressing in this first section of the two analysis chapters. Practitioners selected those young people they considered hard to reach, in terms of not reaching their potential and unlikely to make a 'positive' progression beyond school. In further sections where analytical themes are discussed, young people's interview transcripts reveal many examples of progression beyond school, as well as examples of informal learning that conflicts with practitioners view of the young people in-school.

While the label 'hard to reach' used to identify participants does not appear to have stigmatised any of the young people in the current study, it may be the case that practitioners had already labelled participants ahead of the research. Indeed young people's interview transcripts provided evidence of this as several spoke of their 'bad reputations' at school:

*They think I've got a problem, like I don't like try or whatever ... some teacher came up to me and said loads of teachers have noticed that you're struggling I was like thanks I'm special needs now ... like saying oh she's got issues with different things in and out of school (Chloe, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

James recognises that he had a bad reputation with teachers and also suggests that this has a stigmatising influence:

*I started off as a bit of a little beep in Year 7, I've got like a bit of a bad name, cos if there's trouble I always get blamed (James, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

This evidence mirrors Waterhouse's (2004) findings that teachers label pupils, constructing their identities as either sociologically 'normal' or 'deviant'. Although Waterhouse did find that this labelling was not necessarily fixed, giving examples of teachers seeking to manoeuvre deviant pupils away from the label. In a related vein, Imogen was aware that teachers thought she could do better, but also recognised that there was different treatment for someone like herself compared to some of her peers. It seems then that teachers mentioned by young people in the current study believe that some young people can leave their labels behind:

*You don't bring a piece of homework in and they send a letter home and I get in loads of trouble ... and then there's other people my class that are like really naughty and they don't send letters home to them ... they think I can do better, but the people that just don't bother, they just don't bother sending letters home really (Imogen, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

Bethany shows awareness that although her and her friends' behaviour has improved, they still are treated according to the reputation that precedes them:

*Other teachers always pick at me for some reason ... in PE I think, they always pick on us lot, like all my friends ... cos like we're not doing it, but like there's other people not doing it and they just like always come up to us and we're like they're not doing it, why do we have to ... it's probably because we were like always in trouble like ages ago when we'd always be in trouble, but we have got better (Bethany, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

That Bethany believes her behaviour has changed despite a continued stigma, suggests that her bad reputation is not experienced as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). This is also the case for other young people who demonstrate that any labelling on account of their behavioural problems in earlier school years does not necessarily lead to later problems.

Evidence for this can be seen from several participants who described how they had changed their behaviour and attitude towards school and education ahead

of their first interview. For instance, Dominic had started attending the Pupil Referral Unit regularly in the lead up to the end of Year 11:

*I know I've got to do it now. There's only a couple of months left.  
[...] I can't leave school without nothing can I? I'll be fucked then, get out of school with nothing ... it's not worth it at the end of the day, might as well go to school get some qualifications so you can actually get a job  
(Dominic, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Ricky's behaviour had also improved in his final year of school:

*Well I'm in Year 11 now and I need to buck down sort of thing, need to get rid of the GCSEs now ... I'm better behaved now more listening and when my friends are egging me on to do something I just don't do it, I just basically get on with the lesson (Ricky, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Despite James' belief that he should have 'a bit of a laugh' at school, he had changed before his first interview and it appeared practitioners were revising any preconceived label:

*Well lately I've been doing lots, loads of work, I've caught up and everything and the teachers start saying ah this is the best I've seen you, since I've met you (James, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

There is clear evidence of the experience of labelling and indeed an awareness of being labelled by some of the young people. Labelling theory discussed earlier recognises that the power to label lies with the practitioners and the label is relative. Labelling theory may have predicted that if the young people were already deviant in the eyes of practitioners ahead of the research then this would become a self-fulfilling prophecy, which does not appear to be the case. Change in the young people points to the fact that being deviant is by no means a persistent stigma, but merely a categorisation that young people can potentially move in and out of, at least in the eyes of the young people themselves.

#### *Labelling as part of everyday life*

Finally in this section I show that labelling was not peculiar to the method used to recruit participants in this study, nor was it isolated to school where

practitioners appeared to hold the power to label. Indeed, beyond education young people themselves hold the power to determine labels and how they apply them.

For instance the young people use a range of terms to refer to different groups of their peers, including chavs<sup>1</sup> (Nayak, 2006):

*Eastford is full of (.) chavs, it really gets on my nerves and they hang around the Quay thinking they're rock hard and it's like, when are they gonna grow up and learn that in life, they're not going to get anywhere by thinking they're hard (Kevin, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

*I've got like emo-ey sort of friends, chavvy friends and then normal friends really. So they're all like different. Cos emos<sup>2</sup> and chavs don't get along and so it's all a bit weird (Imogen, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

Interestingly the young people did not typically identify themselves as part of any of these stigmatised groups:

*We're like just normal, we're not anything. Just ourselves (Harriet, 1/2, 2008, Year 11).*

Some of the young people showed that they were aware of the labelling experienced by teenagers:

*I'm not just saying it cos I'm a teenager, but cos you know like it's a stereotype isn't it, oh "you're just saying that because you're a teenager" ((grumpy adult voice)) sort of thing ... they think it's just us teenagers moaning (Kirsty, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

There are a couple of other labels that the young people wished to avoid, firstly like Willis' (1977) lads, some of the young people seek to dissociate themselves from their peers who openly work hard at school:

*'I don't see the point really in just sitting there and being quiet and getting on with all your work cos you won't have any friends and you'll just be known as a boffin, you'll get a lot of stick' (James, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

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<sup>1</sup> Typically derogatory term for a white, working class person. Often associated with aggression, anti-social behaviour, urban living and a perceived 'common' taste in clothing and lifestyle.

<sup>2</sup> A sub-culture generally categorised by a broad style of rock music, dark clothes, skinny-leg jeans, dark eyeliner, music related clothing.

Secondly, several of the young people agree that they should do something post-16:

*'I don't want to get kicked out of College and be a bum, that's the last thing I want' (Kirsty, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

*'I want to go to college and get some qualifications, that way I'll get further in life and not end up being a bum' (Imogen, 2/3, 2009, Year 11).*

The labelling experienced by some of the young people in the current study involved bad reputations they had often acquired earlier in school. This labelling did not appear to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, with many young people not fitting labels they considered practitioners to use, particularly over time. Beyond school, young people's narratives showed awareness of several labels; however, the majority were labels that the young people did not think, and would not want to, apply to them.

This introductory section has focused upon who the young people who participated in the research were. It has outlined the characteristics of the young people, identifying the commonalties these young people identified as 'hard to reach' shared. However, data revealed that the participants were by no means a homogenous group, even though they were labelled using the same term. The backgrounds and circumstances of these young people were highlighted and shown to impact their experiences at school. The issue of labelling was then considered; participants appeared to experience the effects of labelling at school and the young people were often aware of the long-term persistent reputations teachers held of them. This section has paved the way for the analysis of the four themes which follow, drawing links between the discussion here and each theme as well as demonstrating the relations amongst the themes, allowing for a coherent holistic interpretation to be given in the remainder of these analysis chapters.

## **Part 2**

### **4.2 School and Learning Identities**

*School and learning identities* is the first analytical theme I discuss. This theme was considered of particular importance to the current study because young people's interview transcripts displayed much negativity towards school or certain subjects they undertook, yet this disposition rarely carried over into future learning. Rather than anticipate future learning in the same manner, young people often saw FE as a fresh start in a more adult environment and even those who pursued other post-16 destinations often returned to learning or training with seeming positivity.

The focus in this section is upon young people's learning identities (Rees, 1997), and how they are shaped by their experience at school. The assumption in the literature is that learning identities 'damaged' at school impacts post-16 decision making and a young person's disposition to learning in the future (Ball et al., 1999). The supposition being that negative learning experiences at school will put young people off future learning. This is an overly simplistic assumption which further pathologises young people who may have been marginalised at school (Wishart, Taylor & Shultz, 2006). I show that this assumption does not hold for young people in the current study; in doing so, I discern between young people's learning identities and their school identity. Some of the young people reject school and the identity they associate with being a pupil there; this dismissal of school as a whole does not appear to lead to the dismissal of learning per se.

Identity ... is a concept that neither imprisons (as does much in sociology) nor detaches (as does much in philosophy and psychology) persons from their social and symbolic universes, [so] it has over the years retained a generic force that few concepts in our field have. (Davis 1991, p.105)

Identity is impacted by the constantly changing social contexts and wider societal structures in which it is embedded. There are several strong traditions of theory and research on identities, drawn from the fields of social psychology and sociology (Howard, 2000). For instance, two theories representative of each of the disciplines that continue to provide a theoretical underpinning of identity are social cognition (Fiske & Taylor, 1991) and symbolic interactionism (Cahill, 1998). However, this literature reflects a modernist approach to identities, theorising identity as specifiable, measurable, ordered and generally

stable. As such analyses of identities have often focused on single social positions, such as gender and ethnicity (Howard, 2000).

The concept of identity understandably links with labelling, discussed in the previous section. Although, the cases presented above did support the view of the labelling perspective that a label alone is not sufficient for an identity to form (Jenkins, 2008). The process of identity formation, development and change that young people are anticipated to experience, is generally considered more complex than the application of self-labels or group membership of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Analyses of how identities intersect (O'Brien & Howard, 1998), along with the deconstructive critique, cast identities as 'multiple, processual, relational [and] unstable' (Howard, 2000, p. 387). Indeed, young people are 'attempting to live with and through the contradictory combination of a variety of possible social classifications, possible identities' (Corrigan, 1990, p. 114).

Amongst the multiple identities individuals hold, theorists from the field of lifelong learning in particular, assume individuals hold a 'learning identity' (e.g. Rees et al., 1997; Wortham, 2006). By learning identity, authors such as Weil (1986) refer to the way in which people understand their experiences of learning. The term signifies the development of values and beliefs about learning, schooling and knowledge in response to these encounters. One's learning identity is of course part of the wider habitus and dispositions that young people hold (Colley, 2003; Hodkinson, 1996). Indeed, the post-16 transition may predict and necessitate a change in learning identity, but changes in school and learning are not isolated amongst the multiple identities of youth in transition (Miles, 2000).

A person's school years are considered crucial, both in forming their learning identity and predicting dispositions toward future learning encounters (Rees, Williamson & Istance, 1996):

Those who have had a successful experience of learning at school are more likely to have developed a positive learning identity and therefore be readier to engage with learning opportunities in later life (p, 493).

Learner identities are highly individualistic, as well as holding the potential to constantly change and be reconstructed in response to young people's own personal experience and understanding of education and learning (Waller, 2004). Individuals shape and construct their own learner identities in the context of wider and deeply embedded social structures, for example, race, gender and social class (Archer, 2003). This means that a further tension exists between these socially embedded structures and individual agency that young people hold to construct their own learner identity and predicts how these identities may change over time (Waller, 2004). Issues of structure and agency are considered further under the final theme discussed in chapter 5.

Rees et al. (1997) also recognise that educational institutions aspire to engender certain learning identities in their students. Therefore a tension may exist between the learning identity a young person may hold and the identity of a student that the young person's school may promote (Swain, 2007). The 'studentship' expected from young people (Bloomer, 1997) at school typically focuses upon the acquisition of qualifications and skills as well as progression to what is deemed a 'positive' destination. While many young people are seen to conform to the expectations of their school (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997), some young people do reject the prescribed aims and methods of learning, forming negative learning identities which in turn impact their future learning careers (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999).

Ball et al. (2000) found that learning identities can be 'damaged' by experiences in compulsory education. When this is the case for a young person, Ball et al. (2000) typically found that 'more learning is the last thing they are interested in' (p. 8). Ball et al.'s (2000) participants represented a broader sample of young people in at the end of compulsory schooling. Participants in the current study on the other hand, were identified as hard to reach and, as seen in the previous section, often felt they were labelled as having 'bad reputations' at school. They too might be predicted to hold learner identities 'damaged' at school that impact their post-16 transition and the likelihood of embarking on further education or training.

Writing about the 'lads', Willis (1977) suggested that such hard to reach young people's learning identities may become exhausted at school, wanting to work rather than continuing to engage in education. Rather than holding 'damaged' learning identities then, Willis' participants seemed not to think of themselves as learners at all. Instead they did not fit the conception of pupil their school promoted and encouraged, in turn experiencing marginalisation (Kelly, 2007), and a desire to leave education at the first available instance. So perhaps it cannot be assumed that the young people in the current study hold a damaged learning identity associated with school, as they may reject learning and/or school. However, even a lack of learning identity is predicted to impact the post-16 transition.

The literature considered above gives several tentative predictions with regards to the 'damaged' learning identities young people may have developed at school and a lack of fit between their identities and priorities and those of their schools. However, participants were not assumed to fit these previous findings. In this section I consider the learning identities held by the young people in the current study, quickly showing that the experience of compulsory schooling is often more complex than a simple lack of fit between young people's learning identities and the school identities (Wald & Castleberry, 2000) engendered by the institutions.

Below I challenge the view seen in the literature that negative experiences in school irrevocably damages these young people's learning identities and restricts their post-16 destinations away from learning. Rather, 'learning identities can be remade or undermined by post-16 experience' (Ball et al., 2000, p. 40); the young people often saw the end of school as a fresh start with different learning opportunities. In exploring the young people's learning identities or lack thereof within the narratives it becomes abundantly clear that a variety of identities are being shaped in the final years of compulsory schooling and young people hold many priorities beyond learning (Maguire et al., 2001). The section therefore also considers how the young people's identities fit with the identity they perceive their school to take (Swain, 2007).

The analysis that follows considers three cases that reveal some similarities in terms of their learning identities and the identities they consider their schools wish to prescribe. The narratives also allow contrast amongst different priorities held by the young people and very different post-16 destinations. A longitudinal consideration here, with narratives capturing interviews spanning three years and young people from Year 10 to Year 13, demonstrates the changes over time that young people report in their dispositions to school and learning.

#### **4.2.1 Imogen – A learning identity changing over time**

One way in which Imogen's and many other participant's narratives suggested that learning was not a prominent feature of their school experience was their frequent difficulty in recalling the subjects they were taking:

*I chose RE, Art umm I've forgot (1) oh yeah, drama is one of them (Imogen, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

Perhaps given this interview's occurrence near the beginning of Year 10 when subjects are chosen, it is surprising that Imogen only initially remembers three of her four chosen<sup>1</sup> GCSEs. However, this was typical of many participants. Certainly in Year 10 the qualifications they were taking were not a secure part of a learning identity. This contradicts with the perceived purpose of Key Stage 4 (Raffo, 2003) and the learning identity that it is assumed schools attempt to promote in their students (Swain, 2007).

Indeed Imogen confirmed that her qualifications were not important to her at this time, viewing them as unnecessary for her future plans:

*cos there's all these jobs out there that you don't need GCSEs for, like waitressing you can get like really far in that, like going on ships and that and getting paid loads so you don't need no qualifications for that. Loads of stuff really, sometimes don't see the point in it [GCSEs] (Imogen, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

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<sup>1</sup> Typically a number of GCSEs are 'chosen' by pupils alongside compulsory subjects like English and maths.

However, this view changed for her and several other young people a year later in Year 11, their final year of school, when Imogen reported needing her qualifications:

*I'm trying harder this year so I can get my grades to go to College (Imogen, 2/3, 2009, Year 11).*

Like other participants, this 'buckling down' (Ricky; Harriet) appeared to coincide with making plans beyond school in Year 11; Imogen's plan was to take up a Level 2 Beauty course at her local FE College. In order to do this she needed to gain at least four E grades at GCSE. Here we can see a transformation shared across many participants in terms of their disposition towards the GCSE qualifications they are taking. However, an aim to achieve an end result for a specific purpose cannot be assumed to signify a change in her learning identity.

Even if Imogen can be considered to have changed her learning identity during her final year of school, this did not persist until the end of the year. She revealed that priorities other than learning shaped her identity and decisions towards the end of school:

*I think I lost track a bit, cos getting to the end of Year 11, they let us go off, like we don't have to go into lessons and that ... I hung around with the wrong crowd of friends back then and they all like just went round town, so we used to do that, so I went off track quite a bit, when we were allowed not to go to school ... I just thought I'd be missing out on something I think. Which I look back and regret now, cos I know that I wasn't [missing out] (Imogen, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

For these young people their learning identity does not often fit with the peer-group identity they hold. Imogen's lack of persistence in buckling down at the end of school and the concept of holding multiple identities in conflict was shared with other participants. As found elsewhere, young people hold multiple identities, but their intersection can conflict (Evans, Forney & Guido, 2009). Elsewhere it is suggested that such identity conflict can lead to identity change in order to resolve the conflict. Perhaps in Imogen's case her identity amongst her peers conflicted with her learning (or qualification seeking) identity, with the latter being changed, something which she, and others regret in hindsight.

Imogen's experience at school reveals how pupils' relationships with teachers may impact their learning identities:

*You don't bring a piece of homework in and they send a letter home and I get in loads of trouble I either get grounded or not allowed out, something like that and then there's other people in my class that are like really naughty and they don't send letters home to them ... they think I can do better, but the kids that don't bother, they just don't send letters home to them really (Imogen, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

Much research and theory suggests that teachers can impact their students' identities (e.g. Meece & Eccles, 2009). This narrative suggests that Imogen's teachers were trying to encourage her in their differing treatment of her compared to her peers. However, it appears not to have had the anticipated effect:

*When the teachers send letters home, that just makes me even more angry and I just don't do nothing in that lesson, just find it pointless if they're going to do that. (Imogen, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

This relationship with her teachers continued to impact Imogen's disposition towards school a year later:

*I really don't like school. Some teachers are alright, but most of them make me not enjoy it. Like my food tech teacher never has a smile on her face, she's always having a go because she hates being wrong ... It's annoying I think to myself why do I bother going to school just so teachers can have a go at me (Imogen, 2/3, 2009, Year 11).*

However, Imogen reported that she needed help from teachers, given her struggles with learning:

*They have a go at you, if you ask for help you're accused of not listening. It's not fair, I'm quite slow at getting things so I need help ... I'm not brainy like some of the others (Imogen, 2/3, 2009, Year 11).*

Imogen's learning identity in her final year of school, which above was shown to vary in terms of motivation to achieve qualifications to 'get into college' (Imogen, Year 11), is impacted by comparison to others and a need for help. Her perception that she did not receive the help she needed at school could be considered evidence of marginalisation (Abowitz, 2000). Such marginalisation

could be considered more critical given that Imogen finds out that she is dyslexic at college:

*At school teachers just think that you're asking for help because you don't want to do it. But like I've come to College and I had to have like a test and it turns out that I'm dyslexic, so when I was asking for help at school, I never really got it, now like I wish I did, cos now I've realised, well found out I'm dyslexic.*

*[...] I don't really feel any different, because I've always been like it, just none of my schools have picked up on it, which is quite annoying, cos they should be able to (Imogen, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

Perhaps this is a constituent part of her change in learning identity, as Imogen may see herself as 'dyslexic' at college rather than 'quite slow' (Imogen, Year 11), as at school. But Imogen spoke of her preference of college and her course there to school:

*College is really good, I enjoy it a lot, but there's a lot of coursework involved (Imogen, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

In spite of the work involved this is still preferred to school for two reasons. Firstly Imogen feels more supported by teachers at college:

*You get a lot of help with it, like one to ones, so helps make it quite easy. [The teachers] They're a lot better than school cos they like treat you more as an adult and they help you a lot more if you ask for help and that, so it's all good ... they don't speak to us like we're five years old like in school (Imogen, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

That she receives help and is treated like an adult appears more important to her, than being diagnosed as dyslexic. Secondly Imogen sees it as her choice to be studying Beauty Therapy:

*Cos it's what I want to learn and school I didn't really want to be in there, but here I want to be in here learning like something I want to learn and something I want to do for the rest of my life, so it's quite good that I enjoy it (Imogen, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

What she is learning appears to have become part of her identity:

*I'm going to stay on at College for another year doing nail tech, which is like extensions and that on nails and then after I've done another year here, I'm hopefully going to go and work on a cruise ship for a while (Imogen, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

Any negative learning identity (Rees, 1997) that Imogen may have carried with her from school has not impacted her learning at college. There is evidence above that her learning identity as shaped by school could have involved perceived low ability, failure in some subjects and priorities other than learning. Previous research (e.g. Ball et al., 2000) predicts that a negative learning identity developed at school would have led Imogen away from pursuing Further Education. However, Imogen distinguishes between what she learnt at school and what she is learning at college despite the apparent overlap, making attributions to fit her changed learning identity:

*I don't do English in my Beauty Therapy, I don't use Maths, I don't use anything I learnt at school ... in school you learn a lot of stuff that you don't need in life, cos if you want to do algebra in Maths and that you do A Levels at College, but you don't need to learn algebra really, so I found school quite pointless, cos there's more important things to learn than Geography and History and that I think (Imogen, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

Paradoxically, although college was a fresh start for Imogen, she regretted not getting more out of school, something that she shares with several other participants.

*I think it was a mistake, I think if I hung around with different people, like my other group of friends that I saw every now and again, then I would have got better grades, cos they were like concentrating on revising and that. So if I hung around with them more, then I would of probably revised more (Imogen, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

This regret over school is seen quite rarely in the literature (e.g. Attwood et al., 2003) and where considered tends to be linked directly to a perceived lack of qualifications when job seeking in the future. For Imogen and others the wish to have achieved higher and learnt further is more general. With hindsight she also recognises that her relationship with her peers affected her time at school, in particular the end of Year 11, thus providing support for the conflict between learning and peer-group identity mentioned above.

Key theoretical contributions drawn from Imogen's narrative include the bearing teachers have on learning identity or dispositions to the associated course. Imogen thought that she had failed some of her GCSEs when she had not. The negative disposition Imogen held towards school and probable learning identity

centred upon low ability and failure did not preclude Imogen from Further Education; moreover, college was seen as a fresh start to pursue what she wanted to learn.

#### **4.2.2 Zara – School was not for learning**

Unlike the majority of young people who attended FE beyond school, Zara would not have seen college as a fresh start; she had already attended the local FE college on a weekly day release Hair and Beauty course during her final two years of school, but did not perceive much difference to school:

*I didn't like the course and I didn't like the teacher so I just didn't like it ... I don't think they were any different to teachers at school, I dunno they just treated me like Year 10 (.) a school kid (Zara, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Like Imogen, Zara did not enjoy school:

*I don't like school anyway. I'd rather do anything than be in school ... I'd rather not be in lessons (Zara, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

As mentioned in the previous section of this chapter, Zara was only taking four GCSEs and only attending three subjects at school. Therefore for Zara, school was rarely perceived to be for learning:

*Sometimes I go into other lessons or Mondays I get put with Year 7s, 8, 9, 10s whatever. Cos they can't find me any other classrooms. But on a normal day, I dunno they'll either put me in someone else's class or I just sit in the back of the room doing nothing.*

*[...] I don't have any work set to do, I just have a place to go, they just put me in the class (Zara, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Learning cannot be considered a prominent part of Zara's identity at this time; enjoying herself and socialising with friends were more important aspects of school:

*When I was in these lessons I used to have quite a laugh with everyone ... I don't really care, I really don't. I really don't enjoy school at all. The only bit I like is seeing my friends (Zara, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

As for Imogen, Zara's peer-group identity was important. It would not appear that Zara held a learning identity, something that the previous literature does

not account for (e.g. Weil, 1986). Perhaps Zara can be likened to Willis' lads in the sense that any prior learning identity may have become exhausted at school. Indeed, like the lads, Zara wanted to get a job immediately after school.

Given that a GCSE 'G' grade is a pass, it was surprising that Zara thought that she had failed her GCSE exams:

*I knew I was going to fail ... English was the best GCSE I got, I think I got a D for that, every other one was like Fs and Us.  
[...] I could spell fudge except the U, no the E with my grades HHH (Zara, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

It was this relatively early interview, one of my first in 2009, that led me to ask other respondents including Imogen what grade they need to pass at GCSEs. I subsequently found that Zara's conception of what was a pass and what was a fail was most frequently held by other young people:

*I think if you get anything a C or above you pass and anything below that you fail ... I think I got that impression from teachers.  
[...] I don't know, it was my English teacher I think they said that I needed a C to pass in English. So I thought anything C and above. I just thought that if you get below C you fail (Zara, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Zara was visibly pleased to find out that she had passed some of her GCSEs. Aside from the moral issue of leading young people to think that they have failed, 'GCSE passes below Grade C seem to lead to significantly improved employment prospects relative to those with no qualifications' (Steedman & Stoney, 2004, p.14). This research finding might be negated if young people feel they have failed regardless of whether they achieve grades below C.

Imogen also said she failed some of her GCSEs. However, official benchmarks would not consider any of her results a fail; she got two C grades and the rest were Ds and Es. She thought a 'D' or above was a pass:

*I think you need a D to pass [GCSEs] ... I think we were told it in lessons, because a Cs quite high, but I think it was a D that we needed to pass, I can't imagine it was an E ... It was at school really. It was you need to get a D or higher than a D, I think that's where we get it from cos we're not told to*

*get Es or anything, it's D or above ... I think they're just trying to make us aim higher. Like in our exams (Imogen, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

Zara, Imogen and several others thought they had failed GCSEs they had in fact passed. Perhaps the message the young people have received stems from pressure on schools to attain certain proportions of A\* to C grades amongst their students given their impact on performance tables (Garner, 2011). Still, given the literature advising against the use of the term 'fail' in education (e.g. Illott & Murphy, 1999), this is cause for concern.

Like Imogen, Zara felt that she did not need her GCSEs:

*I took them, I turned up for all the exams, but I haven't found that I've really needed my GCSEs anyway.*

*[...] I haven't found the GCSEs helpful ... I think GCSEs they help if you want to go to College, otherwise if you don't get those GCSEs, you've got to retake some certain, core like subjects. Whereas if you were going to go straight into a job I don't think, it can help, but I don't think it really matters (Zara, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Given that Zara went into employment after school, her results were not needed in order to access a chosen Further Education course. Given this and her disposition towards school when she attended, perhaps surprisingly Zara, as well as other young people, miss school:

*I never thought I'd say it but I do miss school ... It's just easy. Easy life, it really is ... you just got to hang around with your friends really and just easy. Whereas now I've got to worry about bills and can't really afford not to go to work. Whereas at school it did matter if you didn't turn up but (HHH) but it was a bit up to me (Zara, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

There is little evidence elsewhere for hard to reach young people missing or wishing they could return to school (e.g. Bahri, 2008), although given Zara's circumstances it is perhaps understandable. Full-time work for Zara did not afford the freedom that a fresh start at college often did for other young people.

For Zara in spite of not feeling that she has needed her GCSEs, she would still like to have learnt more at school:

*I think if I went back to school, I pretty much would muck around just as much as I used to, but I'd actually do the work ... I'd be more brainier ...*

*Actually doing the work, GCSEs haven't bothered me at all. It's just I'd actually do the work (Zara, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

She shared this with a number of other young people. But by the following year Zara even wanted to improve her GCSE results:

*Yeah I'd actually work and try and get good GCSEs cos just so it looked good really, I haven't found that I needed them, but it does look better ... For when you apply for a job, I had to say look I pretty much failed everything (Zara, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Compared to Imogen above, a stronger paradox is seen for Zara. Zara said that she did not use what she learnt at school and said she hated school, but in hindsight she wishes she could return and would like better grades.

Zara's learning identity or experience of learning in school did not match her reaction to learning when in 2010 she began training alongside her job at a care home. She completed basic training and had commenced an NVQ:

*I think I've got about 19 folders in all to do, but I think I've done about five or six of them. But there's no like time limits on them really, to get them done ... they're based on all sorts of different things, like cooking, fire training, first aid, that sort of thing ...you take the folders home and do it yourself, a bit like a test really and you get a certificate if you pass it, for each folder ... so I have a qualification really. So if I go to get another job in a care home, I'm more likely to get it with an NVQ (Zara, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Certainly any potentially damaged learning identity developed at school has not had a lasting effect on Zara's views on learning. She distinguished between learning during training and learning at school:

*It's [training] a lot better ... This is what I want to do, I didn't enjoy school at all, this is something that I enjoy, its optional really isn't it so (Zara, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Like Imogen, the fact that she is now learning about what she wants to do and pursue as a career, and that it is enjoyed and is perceived as optional, means that whatever learning identity was held at school has not carried over into future learning. It also suggests that learning identity may be influenced by and aligned with careership (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997).

#### 4.2.3 Ricky – A positive learning identity developed too late?

Many similarities could be seen comparing the narratives of Imogen and Zara despite their differing post-16 destinations. Like Imogen, Ricky recognised that he was more focussed on learning in Year 11:

*I would like to have really good GCSEs to find a really good job ... Just this year it's started kicking in a bit. Year 7, 8, 9, 10, in all those other years I was mucking about and now I think it's stupid what I did then.  
[...] I'm in Year 11 now and I need to buck down sort of thing, need to get the GCSEs now (Ricky, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Perhaps Ricky had modified or developed his learning identity in his final year of school. However, a focus upon qualifications and outcomes may not necessarily imply a strengthened learning identity (Heinegg, 2008). Unlike Imogen, Ricky seemed to persist with his new found attitude to his schoolwork. A year later in Year 12, he regretted that this change had not occurred earlier:

*I should have stuck more, like listened to more I reckon throughout school. So that's my advice sort of ... If I'd done that, I would have had better grades (Ricky, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

However, Ricky was one of several young people who spoke about things they had learnt outside of school. Such informal learning, demonstrates that school is not the only source of learning for these young people and therefore not the only influence upon their learning identities. Ricky completed an extended work experience placement at a BMW garage, enjoying the challenge and learning much:

*I had a week of it with school, the school sort of thing and then in the holidays, the Summer holidays BMW phoned me up and asked if I would like another two weeks and I said yes, yes please  
[...] I was observing what they're doing underneath the bonnet sort of thing, like the technician and then I also worked in the parts department, which I liked doing that, that was the best time.  
[...] I liked it there, everyone was friendly, it wasn't like learning really, just watching until you got it and then you would have a go yourself, no pressure ... not like classroom learning (Ricky, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

As mentioned in the previous section with regard to labels young people wish to avoid, for Ricky and many other young people an identity as a student is much preferred to 'doing nothing' beyond school:

*Further Education that's pretty important to me.*

*[...] Cos I didn't want to just be at home, I'm going to say it, I didn't want to be like a dole, a person who's on the dole, I want to make something of my life, you know. The people who are not doing something with their lives are staying at home and I don't want to be a person that stays at home and someone else pays for me to stay there, I want to earn my keep sort of thing (Ricky, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

While some young people's learning identity developed at school does not predict their future orientation to learning, often young people are clear about identities or labels they seek to avoid.

Like Imogen, Ricky preferred learning at college to learning at school:

*The way the lessons are kind of set out are pretty good. The way like at College, like they explain things more fully if you need to. Perri High I don't think it was like (.) Cos there was thirty odd people in a class. In my class at the moment there's nine people. So they've got more of a chance to come round and see us individually and I think that's pretty good, you get more of a chance to learn (Ricky, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Unlike Imogen and Zara, Ricky did not express a desire to actually return to school and improve on his performance. He appreciated the freedom of Further Education:

*They think that now you're at College, it's just, you can have more authority sort of thing. I don't know if it's called authority or not, but you're an adult now.*

*[...] I like it here, I prefer it to school (Ricky, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Given what Ricky had said about not wishing to stay at home and do nothing, it is surprising that this is the position in which he found himself in Year 13:

*I don't do anything now. I work a couple of hours at Tesco's and that's it. That's my life and I go do football on a Tuesday and a Friday and that's it now ... I'm not doing anything with my life, just a bum, yeah, there's no other way to explain it (Ricky, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Ricky left his second year of college after breaking his leg playing football, withdrawing from college once he felt '*I had to have too much time off and I was too far behind on my College work*' (Ricky, Year 13). Happenstance, in this case Ricky breaking his leg, therefore has a crucial bearing on young people's actions and identities (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999). The influence of both a seemingly positive learning identity and negative identities that wished to be avoided upon decision making and action was not strong enough to prevent Ricky leaving college.

#### **4.2.4 Summary**

These cases defy the prediction drawn from the literature that learning identities are damaged on account of negative experiences at school and then impact an individual's future orientation to learning opportunities. Imogen, Zara and Ricky all said they disliked school, but all three of them pursued learning or training at some point post-16 which they spoke about positively. Imogen and Zara's narratives showed how they had considered themselves failing in their GCSE studies on account of the normative transgression that A\*-C GCSE grades should be achieved. Finally it seems that learning identities are often at their strongest when aligned with career identities, meaning that young people find the learning most purposeful and report it being most enjoyable when it relates to their future career aspirations.

## Part 3

### 4.3 Imagined Futures

Imagined futures, referring to young people's aspirations, was a salient issue revealing itself across the majority of young people's interview transcripts. Of course I always intended to ask young people about their futures during interviews, but I was struck by the diversity of imagined futures they revealed and how they changed for individuals between interviews. When compared to the literature on young peoples' imagined futures and fantasy futures, the analysis revealed a more complex picture of young people's aspirations, often related to their career goals and learner identities.

The idea that young people have aspirations about their future lives is an issue that has been recognised in the literature on young people. Such 'imagined futures' refer to young people's plans and thoughts about their own futures. Often the focus in the literature is upon imagined futures related to education or work (e.g. Lawy, 2002b) or carry the assumption that imagined futures are unrealistic plans distant from young people's current lives (Quinn et al., 2008). However, more recently there is wider recognition that young people hold lifestyle aspirations as well as career aspirations (Atkins, 2009). In both the current study and other literature imagined futures are distinguished from immediate short-term choices made by young people, such as their choice of college course in the next academic year (Ball et al., 2000); instead, they typically refer to longer term aspirations such as attending University or long-term careers (Walker, 2007).

In chapter 2 I described how Ball et al. (1999) identified three types of imagined future in their sample of young people across the post-16 transition: those with clear imagined futures that appear possible; those with vague imagined futures that appear unstable; and finally those with no imagined future providing a focus for decision making. While Ball et al. (1999) freely admit that their typology is primarily heuristic and flexible, they find that imagined futures are often related to post-16 decision making and can be situated within young people's habituses and social horizons (cf. Hodkinson et al., 1996).

According to Ball et al. (1999) young people's imagined futures typically consist of goals, aspirations and dreams. With regard to young people's dreams, Ball et al. (1999) draw upon Bettis's (1996) term 'fantasy future', referring to some young people's more distant dreams, typically unplanned and relatively unobtainable (Atkins, 2009). Atkins (2009) provides supporting evidence that young people often dream of sudden transformations to wealth and celebrity, whereas Lawy (2002a) suggests that such obfuscation may be indicative of a lack of both narrative of the self and access to normatively defined success criteria held by young people.

While the three types of imagined futures outlined by Ball et al. (1999) range from clearly mapped out future plans to the rejection of imagined futures in favour of 'the here and now' (p. 212), others argue that such theorisation of imagined futures is unhelpful (e.g. Lewis et al., 1999). Du Bois Reymond (1998) finds that the present and living life is of greater importance than their future plans for many young people, suggesting that identifying and typing young people's imagined futures risks misinterpreting their focus which is typically grounded in the present.

During each interview participants were asked about their future plans. In this section I interpret these imagined futures and compare them to the previous literature on the subject. This analysis suggests that the imagined futures of the young people in the current study were more nuanced than those outlined by Ball et al. (1999). I end by proposing an alternative typology, one that complements the finding that young people's imagined futures themselves are also in transition. I commence this interpretation with discussion of James's case, whose imagined futures shared similarities with other participants.

#### **4.3.1 James – Imagined future to fantasy future to reality**

During his first interview in Year 11 James expressed his interest in cars:

*I've always been into cars, I've always bought like Fast Car, Max Power [magazines] and that. And I've just always been interested in them and I know like pretty much the name of every single car ... when I've got a*

*licence I want an RS Turbo, like Ford Escort and then I want a GTI 106, there's quite a lot I want really (James, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

In this interview James revealed his imagined future:

*I want to open up my own garage one day, like hopefully in my early thirties ... I'd probably be looking to have kids by then and I want to be able to provide for them and everything, so I'd like to have my own garage (James, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

James knew the college course that he wanted to pursue, which did indeed fit with his imagined future:

*Yeah I've always known really, cos since I've started this school I've always wanted to be a mechanic ... I've already planned to go to College, I think I chose engine repair and I'll do bodywork in my spare time (James, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

This supports Ball et al.'s (1999) finding that post-16 decision making is related to imagined futures held by young people, as James' chosen college course fits with his imagined future of being a mechanic and opening his own garage. It contrasts with Du Bois Reymond's view who saw a preoccupation with the present in the young people she studied. Despite the complementary post-16 destination and imagined future, James' imagined future still fits the vague and unstable type that Ball et al. (1999) outlined, after all during his first interview the gap between completing his college course and opening his own business, which he anticipated doing when he was in his thirties, was unplanned:

*Haven't really thought about that. Look for a job, get an apprenticeship, earn some money to pay for my Garage you know (James, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

In Year 12 James pursued a Level 1 course in vehicle body repair at the college closest to his home. During his second interview he reiterated the same aspiration:

*What appeals is to have my own garage and nice cars outside and that, there's just always work in cars (James, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

While James' imagined future had remained constant over his post-16 transition James also described another, related imagined future in Year 12 which

suggests that young people can have more than one imagine future and that they may be related to one another:

*I'd like to get like ten, fifteen grand in my bank account, get a nice car and like take it over to America, take the money and go live there ... if you look at some of the garages over there compared to here, it's just what I'd love, I'd love to live out there and get a job in one of those garages full-time, I'd be so happy (James, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Perhaps this imagined future of moving to America was more a fantasy future (Bettis, 1996); after all James recognised that this was a dream for him:

*That's just what I want to do really, but if it doesn't happen, it doesn't happen. You never know, I might get the money and the car and go there and just find nothing and end up coming back again (James, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

However, things had changed by James' final interview in Year 13; he had nearly completed the Level 2 vehicle body repair course that he progressed onto. But his focus was upon finishing college, finding work and moving out, rather than any imagined future or dream:

*I'm leaving college and think I'm getting a job as an electrician, like 9 til 5 ... It's not actually like an electrician, but the labouring work of it. It's with my brother so I can't exactly get the sack obviously, if you know what I mean. Well I could, but I know I can learn it at my own pace and that, so I don't feel like rushed or anything like that  
[...] I want to get a flat quite soon, I want to move out (James, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

James was more likely to describe such shorter-term plans rather than an imagined future in this final interview. When asked about five years ahead, he 'couldn't really say to be honest' (James, Year 13). Likewise he recognised that his dream to move to America was unlikely to occur:

*I still want it really, but like I faced reality a bit, might never happen so there's no point getting my hopes up for something like that ... let's be honest it's not an easy thing to do at all is it, like hell of a hard (James, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

This recognition that his dream was unlikely to materialise, contrasts with what Atkins (2009) reports. Her participants, who also studied vocational courses at

college, tended to hold fantasy futures without the recognition that these were improbable. Perhaps, given that Atkins (2009) was a cross-sectional case study, the current longitudinal research is able to indicate that young people may reassess the likelihood of their fantasy futures over time.

However, with regard to his other imagined future of opening his own garage, James is more optimistic, planning to continue practising his vehicle bodywork in his own time in order to take steps towards his imagined future:

*Well like I'm going to start practising myself in the nights, like buy a car and get a spraygun and that and just doing it all like myself, I know I can do it all now really so (1) and so I won't forget and then maybe one day open up my own little garage somewhere maybe. I might like save up and just buy a bit of land somewhere and sort of build it up from there, like. And then start doing my own bit of private stuff and then get bigger and bigger like (James, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

What James' narrative reveals is a change over time in how he views his imagined future. While pursuing qualifications that would assist him in one day opening his own garage he was focussed upon this outcome, although uncertain of the exact steps necessary to reach his goal. At the end of college, financial worries and the need to work and move out were more pressing, meaning action was taken that was not necessarily related to an imagined future and fantasy futures were released as unlikely dreams.

James' case has been outlined here as his imagined futures share similarities with other participants; over time he mentions opening his own business, moving abroad and moving out of home, future plans shared with many other young people. In relation to previous literature, James' narrative shows that his imagined future appears both vague and unstable, therefore fitting this type that Ball et al. (1999) presented. James clearly considers his future and without prompting mentioned his imagined future of opening his own garage in all three interviews, therefore there is no support for Hutton (1995) who found that youth reject independence and adulthood, particularly given James' later focus upon finding work and moving out.

### 4.3.2 Kurt and Hayley – Steps towards their own salon

Like James, Kurt and Hayley were also first interviewed in Year 11 and held imagined futures of having their own business:

*I'll work for a bit to earn some money first and save up money for a salon ... I've always wanted to have my own salon (Hayley, 2/2, 2009, Year 12).*

*Obviously I want to work in a salon for a while. Just get a feel for it and then I get a sense of how to run a business and then obviously once I stop enjoying hairdressing in working on clients, then I'll open a salon (Kurt, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Indeed this pre-transition imagined future of being self-employed, and the appeal of it, was shared with a number of other participants:

*'I've just always wanted to have my own business' (Sean, Year 10).*

*'I wanted to do Business (GCSE) because I want to set up my own business about hair and beauty and that' (Samantha, Year 10).*

*'I'd like to get an apprentice, being a plumber and then hopefully after that have my own business as a plumber ... cos you're the one in charge aren't you, you don't really have to answer to anybody' (John, Year 11).*

*'When I'm older I just want to be self-employed and have like people pay me to do the work and that, earn more money that way' (Jacob, Year 11).*

Planning to open one's own business is clearly related to the more short-term post-16 transition plans made by the young people, although the prospect of self-employment typically remains distant and vague. Both these findings match that of Ball et al. (1999). Presumably to begin with this ambitious aspiration of opening a salon would be considered to fit their vague and unstable imagined future type. However, unlike James and other participants, these two young people can be seen to be taking steps to turn their distant imagined future into a reality:

*If you want to own your own salon eventually, you have to have your Level 3 (Kurt, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Towards the end of his second year of college, Kurt had secured himself a job at a newly opened salon, enabling him to progress onto the Level 3 NVQ in Hairdressing course in 2011, which requires students to have a paid placement.

Hayley gained work experience in Year 12 at a local salon. In Year 13 she had begun an apprenticeship there.

For some young people like Kurt and Hayley who can be seen to take steps towards an imagined future post-transition, their imagined future becomes clearer and more possible. This was not the case for James though, whose imagined future of his '*own little garage somewhere*' (James, Year 13) remained distant and unplanned. It cannot be assumed that as the young people get older their vague and unstable imagined futures move towards Ball et al.'s clear and possible type. Rather, it is whether young people are successful in the steps they attempt toward their imagined future that lead to greater stability and likelihood. James' imagined future of opening his own business alters each year without him moving towards it, whereas Kurt and Hayley hold clearer and more possible imagined futures, aiming to complete their Level 3 NVQ and Apprenticeship respectively in Year 14. For those who are moving towards their imagined future, something that once might have seemed vague and unstable is becoming more likely. This then raises an issue with Ball et al.'s (1999) vague and unstable type, indeed their whole typology, namely that the types are seen as rigid and unchanging. For Kurt and Hayley their imagined futures change over time.

#### **4.3.3 Imogen and Bethany – Imagining getting away**

Imogen and Bethany's imagined futures also changed over the course of their three interviews, although their imagined futures show parallels to James' fantasy future of moving abroad. As mentioned in the previous section, Imogen studied Beauty Therapy at an FE college while Bethany secured a Hairdressing apprenticeship. Both held an imagined future of wanting to work abroad, on cruise ships and travelling:

*I want to work on cruise ships, meet lots of new people. My Mum's friend has worked on cruise ship as a nurse, she really enjoyed it and you get to see lots of the world ... Hearing about it makes me set, I don't want to spend all my life in one town, I want to use my Beauty Therapy to travel (Imogen, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Like James and others she wants to get away from where she lives as 'there's nothing to do' (Imogen, Year 11). Post-transition in Year 12, Imogen reiterated her reasoning for seeking this imagined future:

*I want to get out of North Countyshire all together, cos it's such a small place and no one ever changes really, I just want to move away ... If I can find a job in a hot country then I would straight away (Imogen, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

She had also investigated work on cruise ships further:

*Yeah cos one of our teachers has done it, the sleeping arrangements and that aren't very nice, but I don't know, I just want to see the world, I don't care if I have to sleep like in the bottom on ropes or whatever, I just want to see the world (Imogen, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Unlike Kurt and Hayley, Bethany never aspired to have her own hairdressing salon, because:

*I wouldn't want to just stay in one place, I'm not one of those people who can boss people about. I don't really know much about doing your own business (Bethany, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

However, post-transition Bethany shared an interest in travel with Imogen:

*I want to go travelling, what I'm hoping to do is go on a cruise ship and do hairdressing, something like that, get away from Countyshire. It's different, rather than waking up every morning and going to the same salon, the same place. Going out to the different countries would be pretty good ... This woman talked to me about it, she's now like set up a salon on her own here, which is good (Bethany, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Not only did she aspire to work on cruise ships, but like Imogen she had researched her imagined future. However, after further research in Year 13 working on cruises appealed less:

*I've heard loads of stuff about it now, like you have to like stay down, like you're not allowed to go like out and walk out, you have to stay in the cruise. Which would not be good, but you get loads of money for it apparently (Bethany, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Bethany therefore ruled out working on cruise ships, but her imagined future of travelling and working persists:

*I want to do stuff with it [Hairdressing] like go travelling ... I'd like to go anywhere, but I'd just like to start off in Australia and like someone who I used to work with has gone there and she's doing something completely different, but she says it's so nice out there and like so many jobs that you can find for hairdressing, cos they want them over there (1) I just don't want to be in Countyshire for all my life (Bethany, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Bethany, like James considered earlier, developed aspirations of working abroad post-16. However, despite James and Bethany both developing new imagined futures in Year 12, differences were seen. Bethany researched her idea of working on cruise ships and subsequently revised her plans when she decided that she no longer wished to pursue this, whereas James did not take steps towards his imagined aspiration in America. Unlike James, Imogen and Bethany were able to draw upon the experience of college tutors in researching their imagined futures of working on cruise ships implying the importance of support in progressing vague and unstable imagined futures. James' only link to America was:

*My brother went there and he just saw groups of street racers in certain places like everywhere ... he's got photos of places when he went out there' (James, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

James and other young people in this study held vague and unstable imagined futures as Ball et al. (1999) suggest. However, young people like Imogen, Bethany, Kurt and Hayley acted upon their imagined futures; either moving towards them as for Kurt and Hayley's aspirations to own hairdressing salons, or ruling out imagined futures, as Bethany did for working on cruise ships.

A consideration of these vague and unstable imagined futures does not suggest that they are held by young people merely to obfuscate the present (e.g. Lawy, 2006). Even James, who makes little progress toward any of his aspirations, shows development in his thinking across interviews about moving abroad and opening his business and regret that he may not be able to achieve his imagined futures.

The narratives considered above show that over time imagined futures which might have initially been vague and unstable can become more clear and possible. Young people often try to take steps towards realising their imagined

futures; they do not always show the passive individualisation (Evans & Heinz, 1994) that James displayed in his vague and unplanned aspiration to move abroad. Evans and Heinz (1994) see passive individualisation as involving weakly defined goals and step by step behaviour is employed in an uncertain effort to achieve them.

#### **4.3.4 Zara and Jennifer – Stable and necessary plans**

Zara's future plans while at school were imprecise:

*Just find a job and then save up and buy my own house (Zara, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

But Zara's imagined future contrasts with the ambitions of emigration and self-employment discussed above. Imagined futures surrounding goals of working and saving to buy a house can be thought of as more stable and necessary imagined futures, therefore not fitting Ball et al.'s (1999) three types of imagined future; they are also frequently seen amongst other participants pre-transition:

*I just want to get out and work, save up for my own house eventually and stuff like that (Sasha, 1/1, 2008, Year 11).*

*I save my money, save some for like a car when I'm older, a house, like you've got to think of the future (Adam, 1/1, 2008, Year 10).*

While Zara's imagined future was vague pre-transition, she took significant steps towards her imagined future of working and having her own house post-transition. Zara found a job after school, initially working at a clothes retailer, before finding work in a care home. Zara did move out of home '*because I fell out with my Mum once and walked out and never went back*' (Zara, Year 12) and has rented two flats with her boyfriend (now her husband) since then. She soon realised that saving up to buy a house was unrealistic as she '*took everything for granted*' (Zara, Year 12):

*Well I thought I'd get a job, I'll have money, I'll be able to do what I want and all this, but it's not, you do get money but straight away it goes and I don't know what I thought. I thought it would be so much easier (Zara, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

This development of a vague but stable imagined future over time is also seen in Jennifer's story. Jennifer revised her future plans prior to her first interview in Year 10:

*Well I've always like, I wanted to when I leave school study drama and then go off to drama school ...but it was like I don't know I just thought I don't think that's really realistic in the end, so I know hair and beauty was realistic and I am really interested in it and it would be a good thing to do as a job (Jennifer, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

However, in Year 11 her enthusiasm for hairdressing had waned and Jennifer held the more typical vague but stable imagined future Zara revealed:

*I want a decent job, I need to get the best job possible so I can move out as soon as I can (Jennifer, 2/3, 2009, Year 11).*

By her final interview, Jennifer was another young person who held aspirations of having her own business:

*Well I would like to set up, like maybe have my own business, but the thought of that now is quite scary and a lot of responsibility, but then hopefully once I've done the three years at College it won't seem that bad, so I'll take it step by step ... I'd like a clothes shop, like Urbanite in Stockton maverick, like not really big, just small, something I would be quite comfortable with (Jennifer, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

Like Zara, Jennifer displayed some awareness that her future plans have become more realistic post-16:

*I know everyone would say they want a nice big house, be rich and all that, That's what I was saying when I was in Year 10, 11, as soon as I'm 16 I'll move out, but now I'm 16 it's like (1) there's no way I could live on my own anyway, I'm still too immature ... (By the time I'm 21) I think saying to be in a flat and that would be a bit more realistic, than having a big house and loads of money. I think that's what everybody wants ... but I mean a lot of my friends who are 20 or 21 are all bums (Jennifer, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

Therefore over time the vague but stable imagined futures that young people held pre-transition, such as aspirations to move out and secure work are often refined. Zara found work and moved out, while Jennifer adapts her imagined future, becoming more realistic. This potentially extends Evans and Heinz's (1994) concept of 'passive individualisation' characteristic of young people in the UK, where young people's goals are weakly defined and the means of

achieving them are uncertain. This is often the case pre-transition, but post-16 young people in the current study more often have planned steps to reach their end goals of gaining work or moving out. This may not have been the case for James, but his imagined future of finding work and moving out was formed relatively late compared to other participants. Furthermore, the imagined futures shown in the narratives above do not fit the prevailing assumption in the literature that young people's imagined futures often consist of vague and unrealistic aspirations that bear 'little or no relation to the reality of their lives' (Quinn et al., 2008, p. 192).

#### 4.3.5 Chloe and Kirsty – No imagined future?

Chloe's aspirations contrast with those mentioned thus far, given that Chloe was reluctant to consider her future during all three of her interviews in Years 10, 11 and 12, thus perhaps fitting Ball et al.'s (1999) no imagined future type:

*No I don't think about the future, I don't want a job. (2) I don't even know what, I didn't even do my work experience ... I think I'll just stay at home after my GCSEs, I don't think I'll do anything.  
[...] I know people think they know what they want to do and that but I don't really have a clue. I used to think but I've just gone off of the idea of what I wanted to do (Chloe, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

Interestingly, she reveals that this was not always the case and suggests why she no longer holds an imagined future:

*I wanted to be a barrister and I wanted to be a GP and then I wanted to be a police-lady<sup>1</sup>. But now I'm just not interested in anything. Dunno I've just gone off the whole idea of like jobs and all of that stuff ... in Year 7 and 8 I had good grades to get those jobs, but now, Year 9 and 10, I've really just like gone down, so I don't feel like I would be able to do it anymore, cos of my grades (Chloe, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

In Year 11 Chloe still wanted to stay at home after finishing school:

*Don't have a clue to be honest [about next year] ... It's not like I have my mind set on not doing anything, I just knew I wouldn't be able to choose, I*

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<sup>1</sup> This gendered language and other examples are considered in the next chapter, under Restricted choice, structure and agency.

*find it really hard to make decisions, I'd prefer to have other people do it for me (Chloe, 2/3, 2009, Year 11).*

However, Chloe did not think she would be able to stay at home after Year 11:

*Cos of the whole credit crunch and we are in recession and stuff, means you need to do further education I think, there aren't many jobs in Grimshaw (Chloe, 2/3, 2009, Year 11).*

Despite not wishing to make short-term decisions, Chloe's narrative supports several of Ball et al.'s (1999) findings. Firstly Ball et al. recognised that some young people do not hold imagined futures. Chloe shows a number of factors identified by Ball et al. (1999) amongst this type of young person, including a future which is 'short-term, it is uninhabited or it may just be more of the present or a matter of wait and see' (p. 212). Likewise Chloe's choice is 'heavily constrained by economic circumstances – the non-existent youth labour market – and inhibited by "learner identities" that may be at best estranged, or at worst, "damaged"' (*ibid.*, p. 212); in 2009 this was the threat of the recession and rising youth unemployment.

Several other participants also held no imagined future ahead of their transition; this typically occurred in Year 10 and was seemingly because they had not contemplated their post-16 transition yet:

*'There's nothing that like pops into my head. I tried to think of like what I would like to do but it's just waiting for it to come round now, see what my options are' (Jacob, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

*'I think I should get a further education ... but I don't know what I'm good at yet' (Jennifer, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

However, more rare was Chloe's lack of an imagined future persisting post-16. Kirsty is one other participant who shows similarities to Chloe's imagined future over time. Kirsty also revealed no imagined future at the time of her first interview:

*I'm just taking it one step at a time cos if I think too much it just confuses me so I just want to get school out the way and then I can think long and hard about what I want to do (Kirsty, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

However, Kirsty was not as reluctant as Chloe to consider the future:

*I've gone from being a painter and decorator to doing childcare, to doing police, to doing animals, to doing plumbing, I've gone through loads of things HH Cos I've just not found the right job (Kirsty, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

So, like Chloe, Kirsty had held career-orientated imagined futures. Kirsty and Chloe both make their immediate choices late. Kirsty continued to take things one step at a time at college:

*'I'm not thinking of next year til we have to apply for the second year, just beforehand ... I'm not rushing it, there's no point thinking now, when I've got plenty of time, at the moment anyway' (Kirsty, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

While Chloe left deciding her post-16 destination until the last possible moment:

*I only decided it a week before we had to come back. I applied on my results [GCSE] day and they said oh I don't think you'll be able to handle doing A Levels and she tried to persuade me not to do it and then I said look at the end of the day it's my choice, if I don't think I can handle it then, fair enough, but it's for me, it's like independent learning and stuff like that (Chloe, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

Both Chloe and Kirsty state their reluctance to make plans:

*I like to take things one step at a time. Cos one if you plan things, nine times out of ten they don't go to plan ... I don't need to make my decision now so why bother (Kirsty, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

*I had dreams of what I wanted when I was younger, but that's never going to happen so, there's no point in psyching yourself up for anything that's not going to happen (Chloe, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

There is support for what Bettis (1996) calls the liminal state here, meaning that if young people are unable to predict ahead then 'envisioning their future lives is a gamble' (p. 13). Evans and Heinz (1994) previously identified this step by step behaviour amongst UK students, arguing that in the UK (compared to Germany) the means of achieving occupational goals 'were often less transparent and, therefore, step by step behaviour was often the dominant regime' (p. xv). This is confirmed in Kirsty's account, albeit related to a perceived lack of advice and guidance:

*The thing is no one really helps you, no one sits you down and says when you're in College this is what will happen, you can have a job in this, no one*

*really goes through it. You just apply for a course and roll with it ... in the interview they just say what will happen on the course, but they don't say like, they don't go into what you can get out of the course (Kirsty, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

However, the majority of participants in this study are formulating and refining imagined futures across their transition, so Evans and Heinz's (1994) conclusion does not appear to fit most young people discussed above. Chloe and Kirsty demonstrate that some young people in this study fit Ball et al.'s 'no imagined future' type, but it is clear from their narratives that this was not always the case. As for other young people with clearer imagined futures discussed previously, their aspirations are in transition as the young people change and experience more over their post-16 transitions.

#### **4.3.6 Kevin – Career orientated imagined future.**

Pre-transition Kevin held an imagined future, not dissimilar to others discussed above:

*Mechanics, that's what I want to do, I know for definite that's what I want to do. It's something I wanted to do since I was like six. And it's like really good. I really enjoy it, my Uncle's a mechanic as well and my Dad fixes up cars as well (Kevin, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Kevin's post-16 transition choice was also linked to this vocationally-orientated imagined future. He proudly announced:

*I think I was one of the first ones to get mine in, my application form ... Motor Vehicle Maintenance, it's for two years, first year is Quick Fit in Level 1 and the second year is Level 2 (Kevin, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

However, post-16 Kevin was unable to take up the course he had applied for:

*Basically they put me on the lowest course you can go on for mechanics and that pissed me off, because I'd already done two years and they put me on the Foundation Course and I should be on the Level 1 ... Dunno why (Kevin, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Kevin did not enjoy his college course, which he found repetitive, having already completed a mechanics course at the same level as part of an Increased Flexibility<sup>1</sup> course at the college during Year 10 and Year 11:

*I'm not putting myself into it at all. If I was to be honest, I can't be bothered with the course. I know I sound like I'm a timewaster, but I'm not. It's the College that put me on Foundation Course, if they had put me on Level 1, I wouldn't have this attitude (Kevin, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Kevin's imagined future, which he said he had held since he was aged six changed at this point:

*Things change you grow up and it just, mechanics is not what I want to do, it just bores me, I've already done two years of it, I don't want to do any more (Kevin, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

However, unlike when he was sure about applying for mechanics which fit his imagined future, there was no firm plan or early application for Year 13:

*I'll leave it [applying] til next year ...you can make the option too soon, can't you. Like last year, they didn't tell me about my Foundation course until I got here anyway (Kevin, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Kevin, Kirsty and Chloe all show this step by step behaviour when uncertain of their career goals. This again fits with Ball et al.'s (1999) type of young person with no imagined future who drifts (Lawy, 2003) and elaborates on du Bois Reymond's (1998) depiction of young people not wanting to commit themselves yet, given that the factors behind these young people's strictly short-term futures is more complex than a refusal of adulthood (Ball et al., 1999). Again it seems that career aspirations (or lack thereof) are important and tied to many young people's imagined futures.

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<sup>1</sup> College course for 14-16 year olds which typically involves one day a week at an FE college studying a vocational programme

### 4.3.7 Summary

#### *Types of imagined futures*

Ball et al. (1999) gave three types of imagined future seen in their wider sample of young people studied longitudinally across the post-16 transition: those with clear imagined futures that appear possible; those with vague imagined futures that appear unstable; and finally those with no imagined future providing a focus for decision making. Partial support for Ball et al.'s (1999) theorising on both the vague and unstable and no imagined futures types has been presented above, although each has been elaborated, with many participants adapting their imagined future in light of their experiences.

While some participants' imagined futures discussed above may appear vivid and have strong and clear vocational commitments, they do not fit the first of Ball et al.'s (1999) three types of imagined future. We do not see the clear imagined futures that Ball et al. found amongst participants that were navigating clear routes from A Level, to University to career in the current sample. Chloe is the only participant taking A Levels, but still she does not expect to go to University:

*I went Portland Uni. To have a look round, it looks really good. I'd really like to do it, but I don't like meeting new people, or trying new things really. So I don't think I want to go (Chloe, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

At first glance Ball et al.'s (1999) second example of clear imagined futures, those with strong vocational commitments, seems more relevant to this study. However, the strong vocational commitments seen from young people such as Kevin and James in this study change over time, as discussed above.

Many participants shared James, Zara and Jennifer's imagined future of moving out into their 'own place' (Zara, Year 12). These and other imagined futures like finding full-time work, may be vague, but they are not unstable, like the aspirations of having one's own business or moving abroad held by James and others like Kurt and Imogen.

Although there is clear overlap between two of Ball et al.'s (1999) three types of imagined futures and the aspirations seen (or not) amongst the participants in this study, four types better capture the similarities and differences between the imagined futures of the young people here. Following Ball et al.'s (1999) use of typologies as 'primarily heuristic' (p. 210), these four types of imagined future are:

1. Occupational goals – for example, Kurt's aspirations to 'open my own salon';
2. Dreams – for example, Imogen's dream to 'live in Spain or somewhere hot';
3. Generic milestones – for example, Adam's goal to have 'my own house and car';
4. No imagined future – for example, Kirsty's prerogative of 'I'm just taking it step by step'.

These four types are evident in the descriptions above and other young people in the study. However, to take James once again as an example, according to this typology, he has shown an imagined future related to an occupational goal – '*open up my own mechanics garage, like hopefully in my early thirties*' (Year 11); an imagined future which he saw as a dream – '*I'd love to live out there [America] and get a job in one of those garages full-time, I'd be so happy*' (Year 12); and an imagined future focused on generic milestones – '*I want to get a flat quite soon, I want to move out*' (Year 13). Therefore this typology is not given in order to categorise young people, as the above commentary clearly shows that young people's types of imagined futures change over time.

Unlike those young people planning to progress to Higher Education (Walker, 2007), the young people in the current study are likely to choose Further Education courses that fit with their imagined futures, suggesting that the occupational goals imagined future may be more relevant to vocationally oriented young people. Unseen is the paradoxical rejection of independence and the desire to accept the uncertainty and insecurity of being an adult (Hutton, 1995). The independence that college or employment affords is seen as a positive thing across the board:

*There's more freedom [at college], like for example, I know it's going to sound really stupid but lunchtimes and breaktimes, you don't have to stay within like the campus, you can just go out and come back and teachers are more relaxed, you don't actually have to be here. You just come here because you want to be here. And that's pretty cool to me (Ricky, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

*Actually working in a salon without tutors there behind you is really good, there is more independence like you really are a hairdresser (Kurt, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Atkins (2009) discriminates between imagined futures in terms of career and lifestyle. For the young people in this study the two are often linked. However, Atkins' lifestyle imagined futures were considered fantasy futures, with her participants frequently reporting dreams of obtaining celebrity. Such fantasy futures were not seen in the current study, with none of the "dreams" young people held directly linked to celebrity. Some young people in Year 10 mentioned aspirations of playing sport professionally, or pursuing singing or modelling. However, without exception this was related to their existing talents rather than dreams of becoming famous. This difference in findings could well be an artefact of method, with the one to one longitudinal interviews of this study probably encouraging more honest and realistic reference to the future, as opposed to Atkins' (2009) mixed methods case study, which involved some written responses.

#### *Imagined futures in transition*

Proposing four types of imagined futures extends Ball et al.'s (1999) typologies. The imagined futures held by young people in the current study were more nuanced and flexible than Ball et al.'s (1999) typology would allow for. Therefore the four types proposed above allow for this change and are deliberately categorical, rather than implying that imagined futures are fixed or assuming that a vague or unstable imagined future is pejorative. The findings from the present study show that participant's imagined futures are themselves in transition. Some participants, such as Imogen can be seen to move from no imagined future – *'I never think about the end of school really'* (Year 10), to generic milestones – *'move up country'* (Year 11), to holding a dream – *'I just*

want to see the world' (Year 12) and then turning that dream into an occupational goal – 'If I can find a job in a hot country then I would straight away after spending the year on the cruise ship' (Year 12). Zara moved from holding generic milestones pre-transition, to occupational goals post-transition:

*I'd quite like to work with learning disabled adults ... I spose what attracts me to that is they're still learning, you're still trying to teach them something. No matter how old they are they're still going to be learning something every day (Zara, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

The reverse is true for James; his dream of moving to America stood still, shifting him from his occupational goal towards generic milestones, for example:

*I want to get a flat quite soon, I want to move out (.) Even though there's no reason to move out really to be honest, like (James, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

This theoretical understanding of the young people's changing imagined futures avoids assuming that imagined futures are fixed, inherent in Ball et al.'s (1999) typologies and alleviates the need for the distinction seen elsewhere between fantasy futures and imagined futures (e.g. Atkins, 2009). For instance, given their previous experiences, one might have been sceptical about Imogen and Bethany's plans to work on cruise ship, perhaps deeming them unrealistic, fantasy futures. However, a year after first mentioning this, both have taken steps to realise these imagined futures, with Imogen's imagined future becoming less vague and more stable. Considering imagined futures longitudinally does not consign the majority of participants to the perjorative "no imagined futures" or "vague and unstable imagined futures" types (Ball et al., 1999). While many of this study's participants do initially lack 'a strategic link' (*ibid.*, p. 223) between their current lives and their imagined future, over time the link is typically developed with young people often taking steps towards their imagined future, otherwise their imagined future is revised.

Older participants may be better able to express clearer dreams, more realistic plans, occupational goals and generic milestones. But the experience of the pursuit of imagined futures leads to the transition, such that transitions amongst the types of imagined futures presented above cannot be predicted with age. However, older participants are less likely to have no imagined future; this

seems to occur because young participants in Year 10 often have not contemplated their post-16 lives in any firm detail:

*'There's nothing that like pops into my head. I tried to think of like what I would like to do but it's just waiting for it to come round now, see what my options are' (Jonathan, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

*'I think I should get a further education ... but I don't know what I'm good at yet' (Jennifer, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

*'I don't know what I want to do' (Zara, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Some support for Ball et al.'s (1999) theorising of imagined futures has been evidenced in the current study. The majority of the young people contemplate their future and embrace, rather than refuse, adulthood (Du Bois Reymond, 1998). However, Ball et al.'s (1999) three heuristic types do not allow for the changes in types of imagined futures seen longitudinally in young people or allow for positive progression from once vague and unstable imagined futures to more positive and possible aspirations. Therefore four categorical types of imagined futures have been outlined, that capture the aspirations (or not) held by the young people in this study and allow for young people's varied and unpredictable transitions across these types.

In the next chapter I move away from writing about analysis pertaining to young people's individual identities and aspirations and consider wider conceptual ideas of transformation, transition, choice and structure and agency under two more analytical themes. However, these themes do relate to the analysis presented so far, for instance imagined futures were shown to be in transition and learner identities have been theorised according to the impact of structure and agency (Waller, 2004).

## Chapter five

### 5. Findings part II

This is the second of two chapters where my findings and analysis are presented. The two analytical themes discussed in this chapter represent a deeper engagement with the theoretical structural issues that emerged from my research. In the first part of the chapter I show that the young peoples' post-16 transitions were often marked by transformations and turning points. In the second part of the chapter I situate a consideration of young peoples' 'choice' within the sociological conception of structure and agency.

#### Part 1

##### 5.1 Transformations, turning points and the post-16 transition

*Transitions* are characterised by periods of routine, interspersed by critical moments and *turning points* in individual biographies (Coles, 1995; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) assume that turning points are times 'when a person's career undergoes a transformation' (p.7). However, Strauss (1962) who first theorised career development as a series of turning points, sees a turning point as 'occurr[ing] when an individual has to take stock, to reevaluate, revise, resee, and rejudge' (p.71). Following Strauss, I consider that a turning point refers to an event; for instance, the post-16 transition is a structural turning point. Such turning points may or may not lead to a more persistent *transformation* for young people. Indeed, of the narratives considered below, Kurt's narrative demonstrates that turning points or critical incidents do not necessarily lead to transformation, whereas Jonathan's narrative demonstrates how various specific turning points may together lead to a transformation.

Prior to the 1980s, youth transitions typically referred to the linear move from school to work (Ashton & Field, 1976; Willis, 1977). While the transition from education to work may be protracted in comparison to the former linear transition at 16 (Coles, 1995), more recent theorising of the post-16 transition

appreciates the relational and multi-faceted nature of young people's journeys at this time in their lives. Yet current theorising is often seemingly contradictory with young people in transition seen as arrested (Coté, 2000) in terms of the move from school to work, but also accelerated (Bynner, 2005) in terms of their 'growing up'.

Contemporary policy and social and structural changes mean that young people tend to move from school to FE (Stokes & Wyn, 2007). Furthermore Shildrick and MacDonald (2006) note that in times of high youth unemployment, as has been the case in the UK since 2008, young people are even more likely to remain in education post-16. Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999) theorised the transition from school to FE in terms of young people's learning careers, the ways in which learning and career fit amongst other influences. They gave a typology of the transition. Some students showed little or no change; others appeared to have undergone sudden transformations; and a third group appeared to be experiencing gradual change (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997).

In this section I focus upon the post-16 transition experiences of four young people, Jacob, Kurt, Jasmin and Jonathan. Their four narratives do show some support for the three categories described by Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997). This indicates similarities between the transitions of this sample and those who typically moved from school to FE. However, the findings from this study challenge the assumption that the post-16 transition is a critical turning point for all young people. The transcripts demonstrate that change and transformation is ongoing for these young people. Nevertheless, such influences play against the resilience shown by some young people in the sample (cf. Ungar, 2004).

The four narratives considered below are characteristic of the fragility of the participants' non-linear, fragmented transitions. These transitions and transformations are not predictable; they are individualised and factors outside of the young person's control, frequently happenstance, are often the precursors to transformation, rather than pragmatic decision making linked to young people's learning careers. While findings show the post-16 transition to be unpredictable, complex and nuanced, this shares similarities with what is reported for more general samples of young people in other contemporary

research (e.g. Ball et al., 2000). This implies that young people identified as 'hard to reach' are not necessarily worlds apart from their wider peer group. However, I first consider Jacob whose experience is rare given that little evidence of transformation is seen across his three interviews.

### **5.1.1 Jacob – hard to reach, harder to reach and drifting**

Compared to other participants in the current study, Jacob's behaviour at school seemed to fit the 'hard to reach' label that practitioners had used to describe him:

*I never do homework cos it's like, no teacher bothers to set me any now, cos they know I won't do it anyway, it's like I don't want to do it, just doing my head in (Jacob, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

*I don't understand any of it [PE Theory]. I got zero on my first test ... she was like you're the first person to get zero in however many years (Jacob, 1/3, 2008, Year 10).*

Given his dislike of school, Jacob clearly anticipated his post-16 transition as an important milestone (Wallace, 1987):

*I can't wait until the end of Year 11 (Jacob, 2/3, 2009, Year 11).*

Jacob, like Kirsty mentioned in the previous chapter, and many other young people in the study, stated that he looked forward to the end of school. However, his situation was unusual, as he was uncertain what he would do when school ended:

*I've been accepted at Barrtown College to do Mechanics ... its meant to be sixty per cent practical so it sounds good, plus some of my mates are doing it so hopefully I'll be in their classes.*

*[...] I'm going to try and get a job when I'm sixteen in August, that would be better than college cos it [college] might just like remind me of school and do my head in ... If I could get a good job I would do that instead of college, but then an apprenticeship would be good as well (Jacob, 2/3, 2009, Year 11).*

While other young people like Kirsty (public services) and James (mechanics) reported reaching a decision amongst the range of post-16 destinations during

Year 11, this was not the case for Jacob. This potentially has an impact as when others had made a decision about their post-16 destination, this tended to lead them to focus on their GCSE qualifications and the grades they would need:

*I've been doing lots, loads of work, I've caught up and everything and the teachers start saying ah this is the best I've seen you, since I've met you (James, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

This was clearly not the case for Jacob:

*I didn't get any GCSEs ... Nah, I didn't do em, don't know why it was silly really, I think I might have done one, but that's it, I just didn't really turn up for the rest of them ... I didn't have to, that's why I didn't cos like you're just basically like on leave or whatever and then they say you've got to go in for this exam, like 2.30 or whatever and I just didn't like the sound of it, to be honest with ya. I didn't end up going ... Didn't see the downside of it, I just thought oh stay home again (HH) (Jacob, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

Of course Jacob could still have attended college, but this did not appeal to him:

*I found it quite hard at school, getting up and going to school, but that was probably because I had to. And with college it was like I would of had to get up in the mornings and go Barrtown, which is like nah I couldn't do it [...] I sort of decided I didn't want to go. Thought it would be easier to get a job to be honest (Jacob, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

However, Jacob did not progress far in his job searching:

*Well I've been doing stuff with Connexions, looking around and that, but not really no. I haven't tried that hard, I could have tried harder really (Jacob, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

Although it was anticipated as a critical moment, for Jacob the end of school was not a turning point, it certainly did not lead to a transformation as it may do for other young people (Lawy, 2002a). Rather the end of school was initially perceived as a relief for him:

*Yeah I was looking forward to not going to school, but then like four months after you've left, it's like ugh boring. You sort of wish you was back at school ... I know it sounds weird, but it gets you out dunnit for the day. (Jacob, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

Jacob shows some regret in hindsight and the view that '*doing nothing*' becomes '*boring*' (Ricky, Year 13) is shared with other participants who do not participate post-16 such as Ricky. Jacob drifts after leaving education at 16, which matches the interpretation of other researchers with participants in similar predicaments (Bloomer, 2001; Spielhofer et al., 2009; Smyth & Hattam, 2004).

*If I could just go back and do them [GCSEs], I'd do them now. Cos it's not hard to sit in a room for an hour or two is it?  
[...] I know I should do summat really, at least look for a job or something  
(Jacob, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

Jacob had been participating with Connexions on an Activity Agreement<sup>1</sup> in Year 12. Activity Agreements are intended for young people who have been NEET for some time and offer an individualised programme of learning often encouraging re-engagement. In spite of the appeal of his activity agreement and the associated EMA payment, Jacob still drifted in and out of engaging with the programme:

*Connexions sort of put me onto it, they set up tasks for you to do each week like go to the gym, so I've got to do that twice this week and then maybe like going for a meeting to talk to your supervisor man about stuff. And basically you do that and get paid 30 quid (H). But I haven't done that in five weeks, I have, but I've missed out on like cos I always don't go to some appointment or something like that, but I've got this like, this week I've got like two gym sessions, cos they signed me up for like a three month membership for free, so I dunno, that's easy really innit. (Jacob, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

The analysis in the previous chapter regarding the issue of labelling and under the first theme *school and learning identities* argued that the label 'hard to reach' was not a self-fulfilling prophecy for participants and that dispositions towards school were not indicative of attitudes and decisions towards future learning. Jacob is rare amongst my participants in that he appears to be 'hard to reach' both before and after the post-16 transition. As such his post-16 transition fits with Bloomer and Hodkinson's (1997) 'little or no change' type of transition. However, this typology alone is limited as it does not characterise the drift that Jacob experiences which he finds hard to alleviate and that with

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<sup>1</sup> Activity Agreements and EMA have been discontinued. The potential impact of such cuts is discussed in the final chapter.

hindsight he would change his actions. Furthermore this broad typology does not distinguish Jacob, who continues to be hard to reach, from young people more typically seen in Bloomer and Hodkinson's (1997; 1999) research that focussed upon the transition from school to Further Education, who for instance are focussed on attainment before and after their transition, but still showed little change.

Matza (1964) claimed that drifters 'lack the position, capacity or inclination to become agents on their own behalf' (p. 29). Bloomer (2001) suggests this is more likely to occur when young people are marginalised; given that this was shown to be the case for some young people in the current study during their final school years, one might predict that their transitions may be marked by drift rather than transformation. Indeed, Hodkinson and Bloomer (2001) noted that students who dropped out of FE were more likely to drift. However, Jacob's drift out of education is rare for the sample. Jacob was first interviewed in Year 10, so was only interviewed once post-16, therefore one can only predict whether or not his drifting continued further into his post-16 transition. In the next section I consider a very different post-16 experience. At first glance Kurt appears to experience a transition more typical of Bloomer and Hodkinson's (1997) study.

### **5.1.2 Kurt – Fragile inter-related transition of career and identity**

From an education and training perspective, Kurt's narrative seems to convey a positive and relatively smooth transition, perhaps fitting Bloomer and Hodkinson's 'gradual change' typology, which would also be rare for the young people in this study. He moved from school to college and then into training. However, Kurt's transition toward a hairdressing career belies the vulnerability of his experience. At several potential turning points during his post-16 transition, Kurt is close to transforming away from his intended transition, highlighting the fragility of his transition. While Kurt considered his career progression important, this transition was accompanied and impacted by transformations and experiences related to his sexual identity. Therefore a dual transition could be described for Kurt, as he develops both in terms of his career aspirations and his identity.

With regard to this identity development, Kurt is one of several participants who experienced a transformation ahead of the post-16 transition (Bloomer, 2001). For Kurt this transformation involved 'coming out', allowing those around him to become aware of his homosexuality:

*My Dad was the only one who took to it properly and like the rest of my family didn't speak to me for a while ... my brother threatened to kill me and then the rest of them just didn't speak to me.*

*[...] I wasn't coming to school because of it, because of the fact that I used to get bullied about it and then my attendance was bad because of it, because I never used to come and then my Dad used to get fines for my attendance, so I started coming to school again (Kurt, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Prior research has documented the difficult experience of 'coming out' during the school years (e.g. Jordan, Vaughan & Woodworth, 1997). As the above interview extract and further discussion later in this chapter demonstrate, typical problems around harassment and heterosexism were also experienced by Kurt. However, alongside this transformation in terms of sexuality, Kurt was making a more normative career decision<sup>1</sup>, for him this was the decision to pursue hairdressing:

*My sister did it and then ever since she did it, I got interested in it ... cutting and dying people's hair and that's like I got a natural flair for it so I thought I might as well do it, it's something I enjoy (Kurt, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

His decision was pragmatically rational being influenced by feelings, emotions and preferences (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). It is this type of pragmatic rational decision, neither fitting policy rhetoric, nor purely whimsical, which time and again has been attributed to young people's career decision making and post-16 transition making since Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) identified this way of deciding about careers (e.g. Ball et al, 1999; Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999; Hodkinson, 2009; Lawy et al., 1999; Stokes & Wyn, 2007; Walker, 2007).

Post-16 Kurt continued to progress towards his end goal of '*working in a salon*' (Kurt, Year 11). In Year 12 he decided to pursue a two year Level 2

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<sup>1</sup> That gay men stereotypically make good hairdressers is a stereotype recognised in the literature (e.g. Hall, Hockey & Robinson, 2007) and by Kurt. It is explored where more relevant to the analytical theme in the second part of this chapter.

Hairdressing course, although he did have the option of an apprenticeship place:

*I applied for an apprenticeship and full-time at college and I got the full-time at college, so I told the people that I didn't want to do the apprenticeship anymore.*

*[...] I think it was the people at college. Because like, with an apprenticeship it's more full on and I didn't think I was ready to go into it straight away. And with college it's just like breaking you in gently (Kurt, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Kurt considered that the course went well during Year 12 and Year 13, reflecting the 'gradual change' type identified above:

*Since I'm at college, I'm just spending more effort and putting more time into the college course rather than going out and being stupid.*

*[...] With college, it's what I want to do for the rest of my career, so I have to go in to be able to learn the stuff and the people are really nice and I get on with people so I don't have problems going to college ... it's going really well. Cos I've got distinctions nearly all the way through the course (Kurt, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

*I'm the only one that's finished almost everything at the College, so I qualified early ... It's different this year, because even though you've got the tutors looking over you all the time, it feels like the work that you did last year has paid off and it's a bit of a relief. And it makes you feel like you've achieved something (Kurt, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Towards the end of Year 13 when he was interviewed for the final time, Kurt had already secured a paid placement at a hairdressing salon that would enable him to continue onto the Level 3 course the college offered:

*It's one day a week at college and then three days a week at work (Kurt, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Unlike his peers Kurt had already started working there and learning Level 3 content:

*Yeah and they started me up on Level 3 work as it is. They've been teaching me how to do Level 3 cuts ... It wasn't really the money, cos I wanted this job that I've got now for the Level 3, so I asked if I could start then, but they were looking for someone now so I started at the time they were looking for (Kurt, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Kurt's career-based transition, in terms of his movement through education and training towards his chosen career, appears successful and not at all hard to reach. However, when Kurt's post-16 transition is considered as a whole, the fragility of both his experience and how this impacts his careership (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) can be seen. In Year 12 Kurt experienced two potential turning points. The first of these was considering leaving college:

*In the first month I was considering quitting. Because of the people at college I did have a bit of a problem with some of them. And then I was going to quit, but then I thought, it's something I want to do and plus my Dad spent like three hundred quid on the course ... that's how it started off at school [bullying] and I just really couldn't be bothered going through it all again. But then I'm glad I didn't because the people that were being a bit bitchy are like my friends that I hang around with in college now (Kurt, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Thoughts of leaving college returned after an incident the following year initially led him to consider this:

*A couple of weeks back, when one of my tutors (.) I wasn't allowed a lunch break and I'd worked from nine til three I think it was and I didn't have a drink or lunch or anything and I passed out and then my Dad got involved.*

*[...] I'd finished all my assessments at that point so I was like right I'm quitting and I aint coming back and then she was like you do realise you won't get your qualification if you do leave now, I was like oh.*

*[...] I don't know, it just seems like quitting is the easiest thing to do when something bad happens really (Kurt, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Despite what otherwise may have appeared to be a clear progression towards working in a hairdressing salon, Kurt's transition was fragile as he came close to leaving college. Another incident that was related to Kurt's transition in terms of his sexuality also demonstrated the fragility of his wider transition and that the 'gradual change' type (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999) underestimates the potential for transformation contained within Kurt's narrative. During his first year of college Kurt took an overdose after a relationship ended:

*I took an overdose on my Dad's antidepressant tablets. And ended up in hospital for three days ... Because I got out of a five month relationship ... Well because it had ended at that time, it was the next day, that's when I did it. That's what probably brought me to it. I had really strong feelings for*

*him. And then to have it like took away, it really hurt (Kurt, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

That serious turning points like this occur demonstrates both the fragility of the career-based transitions that these young people may make, but also demonstrates the complexity of the post-16 transition when it is considered holistically beyond education and as an extended period of time. Given the wider perspective of the post-16 transition taken in this study and the contemporary literature (e.g. Stokes & Wyn, 2007), Bloomer and Hodkinson's (1999) restrictive typology cannot adequately capture the multifarious transitions of many young people. The turning points experienced by Kurt may have led to a transformation for other young people. However, Kurt was able to draw upon his resiliency (Wyn & Dwyer, 1999). He persisted with college, despite his experiences there and in hindsight he considered that his reaction to breaking up with his boyfriend '*wasn't worth it*' (Kurt, Year 12).

Some of the female participants (Bethany and Harriet) also pursued hairdressing, but their experiences differed to Kurt. Bethany was pursuing a Hairdressing apprenticeship, which she did leave in Year 12. However, she too was resilient, quickly finding another employer to continue her apprenticeship with:

*I just wasn't happy there and just wanted to go to another salon and see what it was like ... yeah I did stop and leave there, but the next day I went to Sarah Jane's and got an interview there, then I started like a week later (Bethany, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

So these young people's transitions may fit the pragmatic rational decision making theorised for young people as a whole and with regard to learning career show 'gradual change' (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997) toward their occupational aspirations. However, beyond this their post-16 transitions are actually fragile, with the young people required to draw upon their resilience in order to continue progressing towards their career. The end of school as a turning point was of greater importance for Kurt than other participants as it allowed him to pursue his chosen career. However, the transformation that affected Kurt at that time, coming out, was unrelated to this structural turning point or his careership (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Post-16 his seemingly steady transition towards qualified hairdressing was never far from a

threatening turning point. Kurt's resilience seems to have prevented potential turning points like his overdose becoming a transformation. Moreover his post-16 transition can be characterised as a juxtaposition between a somewhat stable, gradual move towards a career goal and a more unpredictable exploration of his sexual identity; with these two transitions certainly not unrelated.

### **5.1.3 Jasmin – Transformations and a fragmented transition from education to work to education to parenthood**

The idea that young people ought to remain within the education system has become so normative to the extent that the category of 'youth at risk [of] unemployment' has achieved near commonsense status in the sector (Bessant, 2002, p.34).

Jasmin was one of very few young people that did work immediately after school continuing with existing part-time work; this was a job with training:

*I just went off the idea of doing beauty at college, I didn't want to do it. And I just wanted to get into work and that. But I'm doing like NVQs instead, so I'm doing like courses through work. I'm doing a customer Services course and then I might do a Maths course, an adult Maths and another course I don't know yet. But I'll try and get as many NVQs as I can (Jasmin, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Continuing in prior part-time employment was also seen among Maguire et al.'s (2008) sample of young people in JWT. Therefore Jasmin's transition was not a linear transition from education to work as she was working while at school and then training alongside work, seeing her work based learning as a preferable alternative to full-time education at college:

*I just prefer working, like I just like doing things, I can't sit in a class and be told what to do. I like actually doing things and that. I prefer doing the NVQs as its more learning in your own time, so I take a booklet home and do it and then take it back and then like obviously go through it with my tutor. I prefer that sort of learning like style, more independent (Jasmin, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Like Zara's narrative in the previous chapter who undertook an NVQ alongside her care work in Year 13, Jasmin also demonstrates how a learning identity that might have been considered damaged by experiences at school (Rees et al., 1997), does not forebode learning or training in a preferred context:

*A lot of the teachers like, not all of them, but a few of my teachers are always off ill and we have supplies and we never really get to learn anything because our teachers are always away and like the supplies aren't really good teachers (Jasmin, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

*I get to choose how much I do or when I feel like doing it, obviously my tutor is going to check up on me, but it is more relaxed, it is only every so often I see her and she is mainly there to help or say "yeah you can move on" ... So I much prefer it to classroom learning (Jasmin, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Jasmin had several jobs during Year 12:

*I'd been working in the Lamb's Head since I was fourteen and that was like waitressing on a Sunday and then I started working in the bar. And I was doing about five days a week there. And then I was working here [The Old Swan] like every week day and every Saturday ... and then I got a job in Stockton Maverick as a secretary ... they was going to do on the job training with me, which was what they were planning to do, but they couldn't do it, so they had to lay me off there. And then I left the Lamb's Head cos I didn't really like the hours there and that. And now I'm just working at the The Old Swan (Jasmin, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Jasmin demonstrates that it is not just those young people in jobs without training (JWT) that frequently change their employment as reported elsewhere (Middleton et al., 2003). She also planned to keep applying for jobs:

*I'm going to apply for Chiang Chiang, the Thai Restaurant. And then I was thinking of applying for the Grand, The Premier Hotel, like just during the week, a few hours, like weekday or evenings and that.  
[...] I enjoy pub and hotel work ... I'm like more a social worker (Jasmin, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Jasmin demonstrates that young people can find jobs after school; those who do not continue in FE do not all drift in unemployment post-16 like Jacob. However, Jasmin is the only participant in the current study who continued a part-time job after school, with the majority of participants failing to find regular

part-time work while at school. Moreover, Jasmin was aware of the support she received in acquiring her jobs to date:

*Most of my jobs are like, my stepdad either knows people. Like the Lamb's Head, my Stepdad knows the man that owns that and my Stepdad comes in the The Old Swan, he knew the people there so. It's like most of my jobs are out of luck and chance ... I'm going to start like pulling my feet out and looking for jobs myself and that. But that's why I'm doing courses, so my CV looks better (Jasmin, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

This reliance on social networks for acquiring work (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2006) is considered further later in this chapter. Career decision making that closely matches Sparkes and Hodkinson's (1997) careership, which includes pragmatic rational decision making, is seen both in Jasmin's short employment history and her longer term plans:

*My ambition is to get into estate agency, but with the credit crunch going on its not really a good business to get into yet, so like what I want to do is keep with this sort of job [hospitality] until the credit crunch is over firstly, and then like maybe think about going into estate agents, like doing a course that is based around estate agency, so I've got some qualifications and then go in there and ask if I can start as a Junior or something (Jasmin, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

However, happenstance, the chance factor which can impact transition and partly explain the unpredictability of young peoples' experiences (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997) led Jasmin to experience a significant transformation after this second interview. She fell pregnant which she said was unplanned:

*I fell pregnant on the pill and I wanted to keep it because I don't believe in abortion (Jasmin, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Although parenthood was understandably a significant turning point for Jasmin, she identified other related turning points:

*I moved into my own flat, this was before I had Leonie and then I got my own house, I went to college, umm now that she's born I'm on leave from college (Jasmin, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Jasmin was able to distinguish between these three turning points and their associated transformations.

Firstly she decided to attend college:

*I thought I needed to get some qualifications cos I done NVQs at work, I done my pub license course and customer services course and I just thought I should do something else. I didn't want to do another NVQ, I wanted to get a proper qualification. I'm studying Travel and Tourism at the moment, but I'm going to start these home courses like Childcare and Business courses which I can do in my own time, I send them off and I get a certificate.*

*[...] I just thought I have the chance to go college before I start paying, cos I would have to start paying full time, so I thought I'd get it whilst it's free, cos I'd probably regret it later on in life (Jasmin, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Jasmin clearly changed her opinion over her first two years post-16, initially considering her NVQs learnt on the job preferable and equivalent to college. As pragmatic rational decision makers, young people of course construct reasons in support of their decisions; furthermore, exactly what is considered pragmatic changes over time (Lawy, 2002b). Jasmin started college a year later than the majority of her peers and other young people in the study. However, hers was not a protracted transition (te Riele & Wyn, 2005). She did not delay the transition to FE, but attempted other preferred destinations during Year 12. A protracted transition is not a luxury that Jasmin or other young people here can afford; instead, their transitions are fragmented as they try new things.

Jasmin left home at age 16:

*I fell out with my Mum, cos my Stepdad was cheating on my Mum with someone we knew and my Mum got back with him and I didn't want to see my Mum treated like a mug, so I said if you get back with him, then I'm moving out, so I did. Got my own flat (Jasmin, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Jasmin moved into her own flat<sup>1</sup>, needing to find help and support in order to do so:

*I got offered a flat off the council ... Well basically because I was homeless because I fell out with my Mum, it was like support living, it's your own flat, but there's staff there and umm they helped me like ... they'd just come*

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<sup>1</sup> Jasmin said that she moved into her own flat before she fell pregnant, however, she did move into a larger house when she was pregnant, demonstrating the impact of social welfare as a structural influence on experience, an issue I return to in the second part of this chapter.

*round once a week and ask me if I'm OK or need any help paying bills (Jasmin, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Jasmin's moving out may be considered a transformation as she considered that it made her 'grow up':

*I quite enjoy it. I'm quite independent anyway, I've always pushed myself, I've always like worked. Yeah it was hard to begin with getting independent and struggling with money, but I've got it all sorted now so I enjoy it mostly (Jasmin, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Jasmin gave birth three weeks before her final interview:

*I was a bit scared of course about giving birth ... I felt down the first week because giving birth is such a big thing and it tires you out I suppose, but nah I didn't really find it difficult. I've got such a good baby she sleeps through the night so I don't really, I get loads of sleep, I'm not feeling run down or tired from it. The biggest thing was giving birth.*

*[...] I was worried about college cos I thought I had to quit college, but I didn't have to in the end cos I'm on like maternity leave, like at college, I'll go back in February [2011]. (Jasmin, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Beyond the anticipated stress of giving birth as a young mother, this transformation was more significant as it impacted on Jasmin's attitude and lifestyle:

*I've matured hell of a lot ... I've just got an adult head, so I know a lot more things than what I used to, like just silly things like paying bills and stuff like that, I've just got a complete adult head on me.*

*[...] I think being a Mum makes me an adult obviously, living on your own and just acting like one as well, cos now I've left school, obviously I'm in college, but I think when you leave school, that's the start of young adult life.*

*[...] Things have changed, I don't go out obviously as much, like drinking and that, cos I can't now I've got a baby (Jasmin, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

It is worth noting that despite much literature commenting on the challenges of teen motherhood (e.g. Arai, 2009), aside from the changes to her lifestyle and responsibilities, motherhood was not the negative transformation popularised in the literature. Rather, Jasmin intended to return to college a year after she left to continue pursuing her course, with the goal to 'Get a job and just basically provide for my child, make sure Leonie has everything' (Jasmin, Year 13).

Jasmin clearly experienced transformations in Year 13. These transformations were of more significance than the structural turning point at the end of compulsory schooling. Therefore greater change occurred between Years 12 and 13, rather than comparing pre-transition and post-transition years.

Interestingly, Jasmin also reported experiencing change over her final two years of school, suggesting that she experienced more transformation in the two years prior and the two years after the end of school, than across the post-16 transition. Many other participants also reported change across their final two years of school. Jasmin's recounting of this change was typical of others:

*Yeah when I first came to this school I was a bit off the rails and I was in time out all the time. And then I was still a little bit like it in Year 10, but then I started settling down in Year 11.*

*[...] I was probably my worst in Year 9 and Year 10, but like I still have my moments, but I don't really get sent to timeout, only on occasions (Jasmin, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Like other young people Jasmin settled down by her final year of school. During the last two years of school, Jasmin and many other participants (e.g. Kurt, Zara, Bethany) also make a similar transition in their actions out of school:

*Yeah I don't really like drink or anything anymore, I do sometimes, I'm not going to lie. But it used to be like every weekend kind of thing. Like something that you have to do, like I thought I was going to have fun.*

*[...] But now I know it's not that good (HH) I've kinda matured more to know that I can save it for when I'm older, when I'm old enough to go out and drink and go out clubbing. Cos I should like use my teens just having fun with my friends I don't really need drink and that (Jasmin, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Jasmin's interviews demonstrate a fragmented transition, as she moved from work based training to FE and an intention to continue with her first year of college when she was 19 years of age. However, her transition was not protracted, instead it was ongoing, with pragmatic decision making about training and college seen to change over time. Later transformations, in particular motherhood, impacted her fragmented post-16 transition. Her experience was complex, characterised by both happenstance and the social and support networks she could draw upon, but was not focussed around the end of school as the critical turning point.

### 5.1.4 Jonathan – Transforming when the time is right

While Jonathan was also looking forward to leaving school, he seemed surer than Jacob or Kirsty of what he wanted to do post-16:

*It was only this year, like in Year 11 I thought about doing an apprenticeship, I was going to go to college but then I thought I don't really think that would work and then I thought about an apprenticeship and that's where I wanted to go. An apprenticeship with Varneys the builders or RVJ Construction and that's what I'm hoping to do when I leave school (Jonathan, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Jonathan admitted in Year 11 that 'there aint really much around here' (Jonathan, Year 11). Indeed, there were only two companies near his small town that were known to offer apprenticeships. Furthermore, as implied above, Jonathan initially rejected the thought of attending college:

*You do NVQs at college. But then I thought it was just better to do an apprenticeship. It's like when I'm older I just want to be self-employed and have like people employ me to do the work and that, earn more money that way. That's how I thought of it (Jonathan, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Jonathan's post-16 decision making does not fit the technical-rational view of career choices espoused by policy-makers, in which young people are expected to make well-informed, 'logical' choices to suited to both their dispositions and availability (Davies & Biesta, 2007). Instead Jonathan's decision to pursue one of two local opportunities for an apprenticeship can, like Kurt and Jasmin discussed above, be seen as pragmatically rational, fitting his habitus (Bourdieu, 1990), rather than technical rational concerns (Hodkinson et al., 1996).

Further evidence that his decision was pragmatically rational, can be seen in Jonathan's reasoning about not attending college and his experience with his brickwork course:

*Having to go there (.) going to college. So like being in school and then going straight to college for more of the same didn't really want to do it. Really wanted to get out and just start working.*

*[...] You're outside more [apprenticeship] you get to do like the work more, you still do it through the college or something, but it's not like you have to go to college like three days a week (Jonathan, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

*I do a Construction course over the Skills Centre. I'm good at, better at doing brickwork than I am the others ... Cos you're like mixing your muck up and then laying it out and then you have to keep it level and keep the wall straight. There's more like technical bits to it. I'm good at painting and decorating, but it gets boring that (Jonathan, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Finally, Jonathan's decision also matches Hodkinson and Sparkes' (1997) depiction of pragmatically rational decision making as his decision was 'opportunistic, being based on fortuitous contacts and experiences' (p. 33). His brother previously worked at one company that he sought an apprenticeship place at after undertaking work experience there. Furthermore Jonathan's teacher at the Skills Centre helped him:

*She was going to write a letter to them, saying that she had someone interested in an apprenticeship and that (Jonathan, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Jonathan, Kurt and Jasmin's pragmatically rational decision making matches other research reported in the literature using wider samples of young people (e.g. Ball et al., 2000; Lawy, 2002b). However, as can be seen in Jonathan's narratives in the previous chapter, his background and experience of school, not only explained why practitioners considered him hard to reach, but understandably had an impact upon his post-16 transition. Jonathan was not able to take up his apprenticeship after getting into trouble for burglary with his potential employer's son:

*The person I was going to get an apprenticeship with, I got into trouble with the boss's son ... Burglary with his son and then his son got in trouble so he lied and his Dad found out it was me that he was in trouble with and he kinda said nah he don't want me no more, that I was trouble so I lost that. (Jonathan, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

While Jonathan was the only participant who was committing burglaries, the impact of crime does point to the fragility of some young people's transitions (MacDonald & Marsh, 2001).

Without his apprenticeship place, Jonathan did not drift in the same way as Jacob though, recognising a need for FE, albeit after reflection upon his situation:

*I got kicked out from my house for like four weeks and then just went downhill loads, stayed at some mate's house at a bedsit, like dossed at his for a while, just started to get into loads of trouble and got drunk all the time and yeah.*

*[...] I just looked at what I was doing and what I had, it was pretty much nothing and if I didn't get something while I was young then I would get nothing when I'm older, won't have no work. I didn't get very good GCSEs at school, so I thought I need to do something, get some qualifications (Jonathan, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Jonathan attended his local FE college during Year 12 taking a construction course, despite his reservations about college expressed in Year 11:

*It aint worked too great, not really come that much, like with things that was going on and that. But I managed to do my exam yesterday and I got a credit for that, that was alright, wasn't too chuffed, could have done better.*

*[...] I didn't bother getting a bus pass and that, didn't have like bus fare, sometimes I just wouldn't get out of bed in the morning, just wouldn't bother. Other times I'd go out and see other people, meet my mates and that (Jonathan, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Jonathan's description of his time at college suggests that he may have been drifting in education, while others like Jacob drift away from participation (Smyth & Hattam, 2004).

However, this interpretation fails to appreciate the complexity of the post-16 transition for Jonathan. Jonathan's fluctuating prioritising of college may have been related in part to his fluctuating interest levels:

*When I first started college that was like, really got into it then, it was really something good a new experience innit. Couple of months later started to fade off and then got bored of it (Jonathan, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

But it was also related to issues outside of education that understandably impacted on his college life:

*I was giving up again, I couldn't be bothered, just didn't see no point in college, and I had stuff going on so I just started to convince myself there was no point.*

*[...] pretty much yeah just had things going on at home, ended up being in trouble and that and then answering bail and stuff and just got a bit carried away on other stuff rather than wanting to come to college. At one stage I was nearly like I wasn't going to be able to finish the course, because I was meant to be getting time [prison], but cos my bail got put forward again, I spoke to my tutor and he said, well this is the time you've got and this is when you're back in, he said you just might be able to make it til the end of the year (Jonathan, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

Jonathan was charged with arson and burglary and initially the court date was before the end of college, thus impacting his view of college. Jonathan thought that he may be facing a prison sentence, believing that if he was not tried before he was 18 years of age then his case would move to an adult court. He also had trouble at home being 'kicked out' for 'just over a month' (Jonathan, Year 12). Jonathan's narrative, like Jasmin's, demonstrates that for many young people the more critical incidents are occurring outside of the normative progression from school to post-16 destination (Bynner, 2001).

Jonathan did not go to prison and in Year 13 I was able to interview him for a final time. He had clearly made a transformation:

*Couple of weeks later [after previous interview in 2009] I went back to court again and everything was sorted.*

*[...] It was my Auntie, she wanted me to go to prison and I didn't have to go to prison, she was hating me then. I had conditions, being on tag and that and she found out I was still going to see my girlfriend, cos she tried stopping me didn't she. And then just like she got pissed off. And when I left one morning, she just come up and was like get out of my house, so I was like wicked, just got my stuff and left, not spoken since. It worked out better in the end (Jonathan, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

In Jonathan's conversation above there are two interlinked turning points, not going to prison and leaving home. A third turning point was leaving college, although he had started a further Level 2 construction course in Year 13:

*I was throwing water. We all do, but he [teacher] just didn't like me<sup>1</sup>. He's seen other people do it, but he just went when I done it that was it, he made me clean out the brick room and suspended me for two days and then I*

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<sup>1</sup> This is similar to the experience of labelling at school considered in the previous chapter. Perhaps the label that Jonathan may have had applied to him regarding his experiences outside of college impacted how he felt he was treated.

*went back he kicked me out and I just went alright, I wasn't too bothered, I didn't put up an argument.*

*[...] Umm I got bored of it I think. I started working as well, I was going to college Thursday and Friday, I started working some days Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. I think that's what it was that got me more working than wanting to be at college. Yeah that's what it was, I preferred working rather than being there (Jonathan, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

These three turning points converged, allowing and leading Jonathan towards a key transformation, starting full-time work. He had long preferred the idea of working rather than attending college, 'Really want[ing] to get out and just start working' (Jonathan, Year 11). Leaving home was an important turning point given that he moved in with his girlfriend and started working with her father, therefore taking advantage of the new social networks in place to secure work (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007). However, the transformation went beyond starting work, with Jonathan's transcript demonstrating a real shift in identity:

*Got the support of my girlfriend, her Mum and Dad, that's all I need. And like having a job, I aint really thinking about getting into trouble with a job, so that's pretty good ... I make cheese, they have these big vat things, have you ever seen cheese being made?*

*[...] I think it's a good job ... I enjoy it.*

*[...] I was covering for people at first, because they didn't have much staff in there, I was called in to work like a day or two days a week and in the end they said oh would you like a job, cos I done well when I was there and I was like yeah go for it, so after the following week I started full time. Been there ever since, well good (Jonathan, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

The findings here suggest that it is not necessarily the case that one turning point leads to one transformation. Instead several potential turning points can lead to what is perhaps a more distinct or stronger transformation. Jonathan even appears now to have developed his learning identity (Rees et al., 1997) compared to his conversations regarding school and college:

*There was loads to learn, like working out the turners, the mould filler, umm strapping, where you strap everything, how to cut the cheese, how to turn it, how many stacks, how long to leave it for, how long the cheese stays in press, making of the moulds, everything had to be learned about.*

*[...] I learn it for myself now, rather at college you just get told what to do. They're like right you do this and then you do it like this and that. And I'm like (.) well it's all crap there anyway. Better at work I think, I knew myself*

*work would be better, but it was just getting the job (Jonathan, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Unlike Jasmin and despite what he was learning, Jonathan had what would officially be considered a job without training (JWT) (Spielhofer et al., 2009). Like JWT young people elsewhere in the literature, Jonathan benefitted from this work and learnt on the job, without accredited training (Maguire, 2010; Quinn et al., 2008). The timing appeared to be right for Jonathan to make what he considered a successful transformation:

*For a while I don't think I was really old enough and responsible enough to get a job. Cos if I was working where I was now, I would of probably done something stupid and lost my job and then ended up going to college afterwards and ended up leaving college and then I'd be like what do I do now and then I would of been old enough to sign on or something so, I spose going to college was the right decision until I realised it maybe isn't for me (Jonathan, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

For Jonathan and several other young people previously mentioned (e.g. Jasmin and Zara), 16 was not considered the right time to make a transition into education or training. An alternative to the view that Jonathan might have been waiting for the right time to transform, is of course that he reformed as a result of not going to prison and receiving what he considered a second chance:

*I was relieved obviously because my Auntie she was like you'll probably end up in prison and even after saying I would, cos I had conditions, being on tag and that and she was like break those conditions and you'll end up going to prison, but it didn't work, so it was all sorted and it worked out better in the end all round (Jonathan, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Jonathan's post-16 transition was very different to the normative transitions that Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997, 1999) divided into three types; none of their participants' narratives were dominated by the threat of imprisonment or family breakdown. However, Jonathan's pragmatic decision making and the importance of happenstance in his transition and transformations does match the post-16 transitions seen in the literature (e.g. Ball et al., 2000; Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999).

### **5.1.5 Summary**

Together the four cases discussed above show clearly that the post-16 transition ought not be considered only in relation to the turning point at the end of school. To do so ignores the complexity inherent in the lives of these young people. Even where young people appear to be making a steady transition in terms of their careership, this can mask fragile and serendipitous transitions of identity, as in the case of Kurt and Jasmin, which also affect their more educational transitions. The experience of young people across their post-16 transition appears to be unpredictable and complex. This matches the findings from more general cohorts of young people studied previously (e.g. Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999; Ball et al., 2000). Likewise the transitions analysed here can be characterised by concepts such as transformation, pragmatic rational decision making, drift, resilience and happenstance; all have been used elsewhere to explain transitions more generally. However, even though the transitions of the young people identified as 'hard to reach' in the current study do not seem wholly different from those of young people more generally, the analysis challenged the use of simple typologies of transition (e.g. Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997).

## **Part 2**

### **5.2 Constrained choices – Structure versus agency**

Under this final analytic theme I discuss young people's narratives which relate to the interplay between the notion of 'choice' and the sociological conception of structure and agency. The striking thing across the data was that young people typically saw themselves as agents of change, but the 'choices' they made were invariably constrained by a range of structural influences, some known to individuals and some of which they appeared unaware. Some of the literature reviewed in chapter two problematised the notion of choice at the post-16 transition and related it to the theoretical framework of structure and agency. Therefore the analysis that follows supports this literature and extends it by drawing upon other theories and applying the notion of constrained choice more widely, to decisions beyond post-16 destinations.

The concept of young people making a post-16 choice carries an implicit assumption that is rarely questioned in the literature. Researchers such as Glastra et al. (2004) recognise that there may be barriers to choice experienced by young people, but rarely is the notion of *choice* interrogated. Some literature appears to assume that young people make a free choice at the end of school (e.g. Foskett & Hesketh, 1997), whereas some of the research reviewed does problematise the assumption that young people choose from a range of destinations at the end of school (Ball et al., 2000).

Ball et al. (2000) argued that choice, or lack thereof, is constructed and constrained by young people's biographies. Ball et al. draw upon Rees et al.'s (1997) theorising of both choice and learning identities in their analysis. Rees et al. conceived that learning behaviour involved active choice, but that this choice was restricted by both access to opportunity and collective norms. Rees et al. give neoclassical theory (e.g. North, 1981) as an example of a sociological theory that views choice as constrained by presuppositions with respect to availability and what is sought after. Such presuppositions are systematically structured in various ways including time, location, class and gender (Gambetta, 1987). Rees et al. recognised that individuals do not enjoy a level playing-field in access to opportunities for education and training and critically pointed out that this is the case regardless of how people understand these opportunities. Individuals may see themselves as making a choice regarding their learning, but to an extent these choices are predictable, rather than random, defined within socially constituted rationalities (Rees, et al., 1997).

Given the above sociological understanding of choice in the context of learning decisions, it is perhaps surprising that Rees et al. (1997) did not use agency as a theoretical explanation for the choice people do make albeit constrained or for the idea that people might see themselves as making an active choice. Agency, the ability of actors to intervene in the world or refrain from intervention (Giddens, 1984), was used by a number of researchers cited in chapter two as a component of young people's decision making. However, to draw upon agency is not to assume that young people choose their career (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 1999), since more often literature tends to use agency as one

part of a wider theoretical understanding for young people's decision making. In particular, agency is seen as a constituent part of pragmatic rational decision-making, which is a popular theory of career decision making (e.g. Hodkinson, 1995) and one which found support from the narratives of young people's transitions in the current study earlier in this chapter.

The interplay of structure and agency (Marshall, 2001), and by extension Bourdieu's (e.g. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) theorising of field and habitus, has been used as a theoretical framework within which to understand the experience, choice and decision making of young people (e.g. Willis, 1977; McFadden, 1995; Rudd & Evans, 1998; Colley & Hodkinson, 2001). 'Structure' sees that human actors are situated within social contexts, meaning that choice and behaviour is to a certain extent predictable (Zusman, Knox & Gardner 2009). Together, structure and agency provide a theoretical dualism capable of framing much human action. Structures range in priority, externality and constraint with certain structures like class, race and gender predicting young people's life chances (Wright, Weekes & McGlaughlin, 2000), whereas agency recognises the potential for freedom in action within and sometimes in spite of enduring social structures.

To the extent that human beings have agency, they may act independently of and in opposition to structural constraints, and/or may reconstitute social structures through their freely chosen actions (Loyal & Barnes, 2000, p.507).

When theorising post-16 transitions, Ball et al. (2000) considered structure and agency and 'the extent to which young people now see their decision making as individual "choice" rather than the product of structured constraints' (Ball et al., 2000, p. 2). Ball et al. recognised the importance of structured constraints, in particular, social and economic disadvantage, in determining life chances, particularly with regard to two participants identified as at risk of social exclusion. For these two young women many aspects of their lives were beyond their control. This perceived lack of agency mirrors the findings of amongst others Solomon and Rogers (2001) and Reid (1985).

Ball et al. (1999, 2000) recognise that young people's individual agency is not only shaped by current structures. As previously mentioned in chapter four, their theorising sees decision making around the post-16 transition as influenced by young people's pasts, as well as their imagined futures. Ball et al. (2000) situate these individual concerns within habituses and social horizons, such that friends and particularly family, as well as class, gender and race, amongst many other fields or structural constraints, at once combine to shape the choices young people report that they make at 16 years of age. Of course Ball et al. as well as the majority of authors who have used this theoretical framework (e.g. Giddens, 1994) recognise that social actions in turn shape structure, hence the dualism of structure and agency.

Actors remain autonomous through exercising choice over the courses of action which they pursue, even though their choices are made within parameters which are set externally. Analytically, therefore, the task is to produce an account of the interaction of individual choice with its parameters (Rees et al. 1997, p. 488).

In the previous sections of these findings and analysis chapters I pointed out how the experiences of the young people in the current study can be understood in terms of structure and agency. Examples of characteristics shared by the young people under the consideration of *being hard to reach – a label*, such as family breakdown can be seen as a structure which impacted young people's experiences. Likewise *school identity* itself could be seen as a pervasive structure, albeit one that did not have predictable long term effects on young people's identities, in particular their *learning identities*. Some of the young people's undertaking of training related to their career goals and their *imagined futures* demonstrate a measure of agency in the face of structural constraints. Earlier in this chapter young people's transitions were discussed more generally with *transformations* and *turning points* on one hand demonstrating the multitude of structures impacting young people in transition, while differences in terms of the impact of turning points and examples of pragmatic rational decision making as seen elsewhere in the research literature suggest some measure of agency on the part of hard to reach young people.

Under this final theme I consider the interplay between the agency that young people's interview transcripts revealed they often considered holding and the

various structural influences that their conversations revealed. This is focussed upon the issue of their constrained choice at and around the post-16 transition. The choice that young people in the sample saw themselves as making was typically restricted in several ways, calling into question the extent to which these young people were deciding amongst a wide range of post-16 destinations. With regard to their constrained choice, I argue that the lack of agency in the young people's choices is one way in which the sample identified as 'hard to reach' may differ from more diverse samples studied in other research.

### **5.2.1 Kirsty – perceiving her choice at the end of school**

In the previous analysis sections I have considered narratives from several young people in order to show similarities and differences across the diverse range of participants sampled, thereby presenting theorising that fits this group of young people as a whole, rather than particular individuals. In this section I focus upon conversations from one individual, Kirsty, using her case as a thread revealing how a range of structural influences are experienced by her in comparison to other young people, whose narratives are brought in briefly as relevant. The interpretation shows the complex web of structural influences which combine to both limit Kirsty and other young people's perceived agency and to constrain the choices they see themselves making.

Kirsty was interviewed three times, twice post-16. She was one of four siblings, living in a deprived urban area, but in the relatively rare position, compared to other participants, of having both her mother and father at home. Kirsty was one of several participants who felt she had outgrown school, disliking her final year. She left school with GCSE grades in order to undertake a Level 2 programme in public services, related to her aspiration of joining the police force at 21. However, in Year 13 her course and career had changed to care, with Kirsty taking a Level 2 health and social care course intending to progress onto the Level 3 course in the year after data collection ended.

Kirsty perceived herself as having agency (McFadden, 1995). She spoke in her first interview during her final year of school about her *choice* to go to college:

*I'm doing what I want to do and (.) not doing what someone else is doing, I mean like, most people when you choose to go to college it's something that you really want to do, which is nice if you've got the opportunity to do that and who would want to mess it up if you can choose what you want to do (Kirsty, 1/3, Year 11, 2008).*

This perceived agency regarding her choice was important and impacted how Kirsty viewed college when she completed her Public Services course during Year 12:

*It's different here, because you choose to go to college. School you don't [choose] you have to go. So I look at it as if, I want a certificate at the end of it so I've got to put up with the bad bits, you know put up with what I don't want to do. Like we do lots of Sport, which I used to hate sport in school, but I don't mind it now ... I do it cos you're studying something you want to. At school, you have to do every lesson don't you, every lesson you pick (Kirsty, 2/3, Year 12, 2009).*

The choice that young people feel they make, impacts their disposition towards the course they take and also their desire to gain a qualification (Ball et al., 2000). For example, recall that young people like Bethany saw their vocational qualification (Hairdressing apprenticeship) as fitting their career aspirations unlike previous school qualifications. This relates to their wider learning identity or lack thereof as discussed in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, Kirsty deemed her agency to run beyond her post-16 decision making:

*I don't mean to sound like a cliché but I'm me at the end of the day and I aint going to change for nobody and I really do mean that (Kirsty, 1/3, Year 11, 2008).*

It is interesting to compare this strong perception of agency with Kirsty's experiences of the structures in which she found herself situated. Although various structural influences are considered in turn, including gender, class, social structures and economic influences, the analysis demonstrates that such structures work together in a complex manner to constrain the choices that the young people make in spite of the agency implied in their narratives.

## 5.2.2 Resisting a gendered vocation

In her final year of school, Kirsty resisted the vocational destinations of many of her female peers:

*Everyone's doing childcare and Hair and Beauty and that and it's like I want to pick something different, but it's obviously up to them what they do (Kirsty, 1/3, Year 11, 2008).*

Instead Kirsty had focused upon a destination that would be typically considered masculine rather than feminine (Shildrick & MacDonald, 2007):

*I want to go in the police force, like do something in the police. Which is what I am going to college to do ... probably the first thing I've thought of I think I would enjoy. It's good money (.) there's always a job in the police (Kirsty, 1/3, Year 11, 2008).*

She applied for a Level 2 Public Services course at her local FE college. However, she seemed unconcerned that a large proportion of the students taking this course would be male:

*It doesn't bother me (1) I say that now but I expect when I get there, I'll be oh my god there's no girls or there's only a couple of girls (Kirsty, 1/3, Year 11, 2008).*

Despite enjoying the course, Kirsty decided against progressing to the Level 3 Public Services, reasoning that a further two years of the subject would be too hard for her:

*Public Services which is really useful cos it is more about how you communicate and that and obviously you are going to need that to set an example to the community in the police. So this is what I did this year. [...] To be honest I don't know yet what I'm doing the second year, I've not gone that far. I doubt I'll be doing the second year as its really really hard. That's if I'm honest. I know I shouldn't give up, but it's really really hard so I don't know (Kirsty, 2/3, Year 12, 2009).*

While Kirsty's narrative may suggest agency on her part in terms of resisting typically feminine vocations, the perceived difficulty of the Level 3 course can be understood in terms of her seemingly low self-efficacy<sup>1</sup> (Bandura, 1977) which

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<sup>1</sup> Self-efficacy refers to one's belief that they can both achieve what they are engaged in and influence this outcome

is in itself a structure that leads her away from what she had 'chosen' while at school. In Year 13 she was taking a Level 2 programme in Health and Social Care:

*My reasons for going onto Health and Care is to help others who need help and being in the police is always going to be an idea ... I like the course the stuff you learn is all useful for carework and you get to do work experience ... I did some with young adults with learning difficulties (Kirsty, 3/3, Year 13, 2010).*

Although Kirsty said that she had not disregarded police work as a career option, she thought that carework was more likely and had recently begun working at a care home:

*I've got a job recently at Beere Manor. Umm on a Friday it's a kitchen assistant, on a Saturday it's a cleaner ... it's got sixty residents there, but I'm not doing anything with them, I'm just doing cleaning and that. But I'm sure working there I'll see things going on and it's what I want to do so that's good.*

*[...] I'm going on to do another two years at college, to get the full qualification and that's in September. So it will be good to get the experience and when I finish my two years at college I want to maybe do an NVQ in a care home and maybe I could do it at Beere Manor, there's a possibility (Kirsty, 3/3, Year 13, 2010).*

The narrative thus far reveals that initially Kirsty pursued a course that would have led towards what would be considered a masculine career in the police force (Jackson, 2006). Interestingly, Kirsty spoke of her desire to become a 'police officer', whereas Chloe, who also considered this career, used the term 'police lady', perhaps indicating that she was more aware of the gendered nature of the occupation. However, eventually Kirsty came to fit a feminine vocational culture and wider cultural inheritance (Colley et al., 2003). Over time the initial agency evident in Kirsty's resistance of a path more typical of her peers, gave way to a career which fits several structural influences whose impact she had acknowledged.

### 5.2.3 Gender stereotypical roles

The majority of young people in the study pursued what would be considered gender stereotypical careers (Flood, 2009). For instance Michael applied to join the army and Jennifer hoped to work in a clothes shop. Recall from earlier in this chapter that Kurt did not pursue a gender typical career as was shown when considering his transition, but his sexuality meant that hairdressing did in fact fit the preconceived role:

*There's this stereotype isn't there that all men hairdressers are gay, not all of them are, but like the top hairdressers do tend to be gay men (Kurt, 3/3, Year 13, 2010).*

Despite 'coming out' in Year 11, Kurt's mother still thought that he should be following a male career:

*My Mum's not exactly happy with the fact that I'm doing hairdressing ... cos she thinks that it's a woman's job and she wants me to do something like my brother's doing [Mechanics]. She said if you wanted to do something with hair, why didn't you do barbering (Kurt, 3/3, Year 13, 2010).*

The narrative demonstrates that sometimes structures are in conflict, perhaps affording young people like Kurt more agency to act according to one stereotype in spite of familial pressure. Although the views of some family members did not affect Kurt's career or personal transformation considered earlier in this chapter, the importance of family upon other young people's decision making cannot be underestimated.

### 5.2.4 Following in working class families' footsteps

To suggest that Kirsty initially rejected a gendered career and then came to accept one, may appreciate the impact of structure upon her perceived agency, but gender is just one of many structural influences upon young people's decision making. Kirsty was rare amongst other participants in that her pursuit of a career in the police was not reproducing the career of any relatives. Recall that Kurt's sister had trained as a hairdresser:

*Well my sister did it [hairdressing] and then ever since she did it, I got interested in it. With her I've done like cutting and dying people's hair and that's like I got a natural flair for it so I thought I might as well do it, it's something I enjoy (Kurt, 1/3, Year 11, 2008).*

The influence of Kirsty's family can be seen in a couple of the career decisions she considered with in Year 11:

*I've gone from being a painter and decorator to doing **childcare**, to doing police, to doing animals, to doing (.) **plumbing**, I've gone through loads of things HH (Kirsty, 1/3, Year 11, 2008).*

Kirsty's brother, in his early twenties at this time, was 'a qualified plumber', while her two sisters in their late twenties had children. Given this, along with helping her Mum care for her grandmother, provides some support for reproducing the careers of family members. Furthermore this demonstrates the complex interplay of different structures as the roles portrayed by Kirsty's relatives all fit the gender role stereotypes highlighted above. Evidence for the importance of familial resources (Milbourne, 2002) amongst the young people in this study is more complex than mere reproduction. Firstly, family may provide information about what not to do. Kirsty's older sister had six children by the time of the final interview in 2010:

*Well I aint got a lot of patience to be honest (.) I bother to go, I love seeing them, but I couldn't do with them all the time, they do my head in ... they cry for no reason, they go on at you. When they don't listen etcetera (1) that's why I'd never work with kids (Kirsty, 1/3, Year 11, 2008).*

The behaviour of relatives can act as vicarious negative reinforcement<sup>1</sup> (Bandura, 1963), here Kirsty's sister is a role model for what not to do:

*When you're young you're kind of naïve (2) so much has gone on around me, I'm just so determined not to let that happen or be that way. That's the best thing when you see others around you, no offense to them, make mistakes, you can learn by them ... well my sister having too many kids and can't cope, her getting a thug as a boyfriend, things like that I'd never go there. I mean that, no one would walk over me (Kirsty, 3/3, Year 13, 2010).*

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<sup>1</sup> Vicarious reinforcement (Bandura, 1977) refers to the conditioning of behaviour witnessed in role models; negative outcomes seen in role models unlike us or not respected are most likely not to be imitated.

This prerogative to avoid reproducing the mistakes of her sister may have influenced Kirsty's resistance of following a gendered career. After all she wished to follow in her brothers' footsteps rather than her sisters', neither of whom had attended college:

*Cos another reason I wanted to do this [go to college], my brothers have done something decent with their lives and I wanted to have a go at this and everyone said you're going to fail this and that, didn't even give me a chance. My two sisters did. But it's not for them anyway, it's for me (Kirsty, 2/3, Year 12, 2009).*

One familial influence on Kirsty's decision to pursue carework was not social reproduction, but the lasting effect of her Grandmother's death:

*Part of the reason [for taking Health and Social Care] is probably my Nan not being here. Yeah I would probably say that. Cos I used to look after her and that, I'd like to look after others, that's probably what I do best. It's hard to know what others are going through, until you see it yourself. Just they need help and someone's got to give it.  
[...] I don't really know, I don't know if I'm doing it because I think I might replace my Nan or something kind of or really what. I think her dying will always have an effect (Kirsty, 3/3, Year 13, 2010).*

Alongside the influence of family is the influence of peers, although Kirsty rejected the aspirations of her peers at school who were 'doing childcare and Hair and Beauty and that' (Kirsty, Year 11). Indeed, none of the young people in the current study felt that they made their choices with regard to their peers, thus showing the agency they at least perceive themselves to hold:

*I've got friends on the course, but friends doing it and I follow them? No, I never follow anybody (Kirsty, 3/3, Year 13, 2010).*

However, family and peers do hold resources that young people can take advantage of. For instance Kirsty was able to gain employment at the Care Home after a friend let her know about the job:

*It come about because a friend worked there and she said there's jobs going do you want me to get you an application form and I said yeah, filled it in, she gave it in for me. Then I had nothing back and then two months later I got phonecall saying do you still want the job and I said yeah, went for interview, she was interviewing others after me, I was the best one so I got it. I went in Friday to do my CRB check and as soon as that went through I started (Kirsty, 3/3, Year 13, 2010).*

Earlier in this chapter when considering Jasmin's narrative the importance of familial resources was shown as her stepdad helped her secure her first three jobs. Likewise across participants there are examples of young people starting working with their relatives, for instance James who started working with his brother and relatives who passed on their jobs, like Jennifer who took on her sister's Avon work:

*It's well hard finding a job, especially when I wasn't 18 ... But I've been offered this thing with my brother, so I'm probably going to wait and do that now. It's not actually like an electrician, but the labouring work of it ((James, 3/3, Year 13, 2010).*

*I did Avon work with my sister to start with but then she stopped and I took it on for a while, my sister was friends with our boss so I was quite easily able to start doing it once she moved. But I stopped after a few months, I wasn't really making any money from it (Jennifer, 3/3, Year 12, 2010).*

However, Ball et al (2000) recognise that for working class young people like the participants here, familial resources are themselves constrained, particularly in relation to middle class families, which are more likely to hold two parents and give young people support and opportunities that go beyond following in relatives' footsteps (Colley et al., 2003). Working class young people's choices are therefore constrained by the experiences and resources of those around them.

Before the end of school, Kevin appeared to fit the trend seen in the literature of using opportunity based on contacts to inform his pragmatically rational decision making (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997). Choosing a mechanics course at college was in keeping with his uncle's work and his father's interests:

*I want to do a mechanics course, I know for definite that's what I want to do. It's something I wanted to do since I was like six.*

*[...] my Uncle's a mechanic as well and my Dad fixes up cars as well ... cos I was brought up around cars and that, I enjoy working with cars. With my Dad right I always do stuff, I've helped him change his brake pads. Pretty much anything he's doing I always like help him (Kevin, 2/3, Year 11, 2009).*

However, during his final interview post-16 in Year 12, Kevin's interest in mechanics had diminished. This appeared to be primarily related to not enjoying

the course he took at college, which repeated much of the Increased Flexibility course he had taken in the previous two years:

*Things change you grow up and it just, mechanics is not what I want to do, it just bores me, I've already done two years of it, I don't want to do any more, I'm thinking of trying something new like cooking.*

*[...] I'm not putting myself into it at all, if I was to be honest, can't be bothered with the course. I know I sound like I'm a timewaster, but I'm not. It's the college that put me on Foundation Course, if they had put me on Level 1, I wouldn't have this attitude (Kevin, 3/3, Year 12, 2010).*

Family influence can be seen to interplay with other structural constraints like the local labour market, as well as young people's dispositions. Kevin's narrative demonstrates agency, in that young people do not blindly follow in the footsteps of the previous generation if it does not fit changing aspirations.

Kevin's changed disposition towards mechanics after he had been 'brought up around cars' (Kevin, Year 11) can be explained by calling upon social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). In the past Kevin's father and uncle had been admired and respected same-gender role models, who therefore Kevin would be predicted to imitate (*ibid.*). However, this was not the case in 2010, where the prospect of becoming a mechanic was known to be an unlikely reward. Pursuing his Uncle's trade was therefore seen as less viable:

*It's a dying trade. I mean not that they won't be doing it, but I mean everyone's doing it, so people are already employing people, out of 200 people that do it every year [college courses], only 4 or 6 people get employed a year.*

*[...] My Uncle works in a garage, he told me ... He told me not to do it, he goes, ten years ago he would of said do it. But he goes times have changed. It isn't very good pay, for the work that you are doing (Kevin, 3/3, Year 12, 2010).*

Furthermore Kevin might not be expected to imitate his father as he had moved out after a fight with his him:

*My Dad kicked me out, we had an argument and I hit my Dad and he kicked me out ... It was not like a one off we had arguments all the time ... used to get along really well, we still do, but like not that connection that we used to have, it's better for me to have left (Kevin, 3/3, Year 12, 2010).*

Social learning theory would predict that the role models were now held with lower regard and as such would be less likely to be imitated.

It is clear from the young people's narratives considered above that a range of structural issues seen in the literature on youth transitions pose barriers for the young people's experiences (cf. Raffo & Reeves, 2000). However, young people do not construct issues of gender and class as barriers. Still, as theorised elsewhere (e.g. Lawy, 2003; Harris, 2004) these structural factors combine in complex ways to situate young people and constrain their dispositions (Colley & Hodgkinson, 2001).

### **5.2.5 Constrained educational choices**

Finally I consider further the structural constraint identified above that young people report regarding their academic self-efficacy (Dorman, 2001), and careers that they believe are out of their reach and the impact this has upon their perceived agency. While this is tied into young people's learning identities at school, later I point out that paradoxically young people recognise they are constrained in the careers they can pursue but see themselves holding agency with regard to their attainment at school.

One of Kirsty's potential careers while she was in Year 11 was working with animals. There were two reasons Kirsty gave for deciding against veterinary work:

*I did really want to do animals but I don't think I'm really cut out for that, cos if they get real hurt or anything like that I can't stand it. (Kirsty, 1/3, Year 11, 2008).*

*What I wanted to do was vet originally, but it was far too hard (Kirsty, 2/3, Year 12, 2009).*

This could be viewed as a lack of aspiration, although Kirsty's GCSE results may indicate some justification for her lack of self-efficacy regarding pursuing work with animals:

*I got Es, I needed four Es. I got that. The rest was terrible ... I do regret that, cos I didn't try one bit to be honest. But that's (.) I've learnt from that because it's now what counts. Which is why I'm keeping my head down and doing good (Kirsty, 2/3, Year 12, 2009).*

The same negative self-efficacy was highlighted earlier with regard to Kirsty's decision not to progress on to a Level 3 Public Services course. Likewise Chloe, who in the previous chapter was shown to have a similar type of imagined future as Kirsty, also reduced her aspirations:

*'I wanted to be a barrister and I wanted to be a GP ... in Year 7 and 8 I had good grades to get those jobs, but now, Year 9 and 10, I've really just like gone down, so I don't feel like I would be able to do it anymore, cos of my grades. But I know I could get my grades back up to A's and that, but I don't try. And I don't think that I can like achieve it' (Chloe, 1/3, Year 10, 2008).*

As discussed in the previous chapter both Chloe and Kirsty showed a lack of an imagined future, given that they both put off their decision making until the last minute:

*'I like to take things one step at a time. Cos one if you plan things, nine times out of ten they don't go to plan ... I don't need to make my decision now so why bother' (Kirsty, 2/3, Year 12, 2009).*

*'I had dreams of what I wanted when I was younger, but that's never going to happen so, there's no point in psyching yourself up for anything that's not going to happen' (Chloe, 3/3, Year 12, 2010).*

In the previous chapter this was interpreted as supporting the liminal state (Bettis, 1996), which predicts that young people are unlikely to predict their futures if they feel they are uncertain. In the context of structure and agency, the theoretical focus of this section, Kirsty and Chloe's liminal state could be seen as a lack of agency, which may be related to the low self-efficacy seen in these two narratives. Alternatively, their delayed decision making could be seen as an attempt to resist the structures that constrain their choices, at least until they have to be faced. Kirsty provides some support for this view showing a belief that she cannot freely choose:

*I don't like to plan things cos I find it never goes to plan. And you don't know what else will happen.*

*[...] Umm what's the point in planning something that's never going to happen. You know like people who come to college and do photography or Art, where are you going to get doing that. I know they're doing what they want to do, which is fair enough (Kirsty, 3/3, Year 13, 2010).*

Perhaps Kirsty and Chloe are more realistic about their structured choices than their peers and this leads to their lack of agentic imagined futures. Nevertheless, there may be some agency in Chloe's experience as she was the only participant in the current study who took A Levels:

*I applied on my results day and they said oh I don't think you'll be able to handle doing A Levels and she tried to persuade me not to do it and then I said look at the end of the day it's my choice, if I don't think I can handle it then, fair enough, but it's for me, it's like independent learning and stuff like that ... I got three Cs but I think its four Cs you're meant to have, but I just blagged my way in. (Chloe, 3/3, Year 12, 2010).*

However, even though her sixth form were focussed on 'uni, uni, uni, uni' (Chloe, 3/3, Year 12, 2010) Higher Education was considered a step too far:

*I went Portland Uni to have a look round, it looks really good. I'd really like to do it, but I don't like meeting new people, or trying new things really. So I don't think I want to go ... I'd want to like have the confidence to actually go out on my own and be independent to really consider it (Chloe, 3/3, Year 12, 2010).*

### **5.2.6 Summary**

Kirsty and the other young people used as points of comparison with her narrative, show that despite perceived agency (*I'm doing what I want to do; I aint going to change for nobody, Kirsty, Year 11*), there is constraint seen in the narrative around their 'choice', particularly related to their academic self-efficacy. These young people recognise that they cannot do anything and do make changes in light of this.

So there is support for other literature in the field that also finds that young people view themselves as agents of change (Ball et al., 2000), choosing their

post-16 destinations personally without the influence of others. But the narratives above reveal that social structural constraints of gender, class, family and friends which the young people do not appear to recognise themselves, as well as the local prospects, economy, self-efficacy which they do acknowledge, means that the choices they see themselves making are highly constrained and situated amid a complex array of inter-related fields.

### **5.3 Summary of findings**

In this chapter I discussed two analytical themes related to the experience of the post-16 transition and the idea that the young people are making constrained choices across this experience. The two themes are clearly linked as various unpredictable turning points and instances of happenstance can be seen as structural influences on young people's transitions, while the pragmatic rational decision making that they appear to engage in does suggest that some element of agency can be ascribed to these young people. However, despite often assuming they choose their post-16 destinations, the young people's experiences demonstrate a range of structural influences including class, gender, family, peers, and the local labour market that can be seen to more often than not constrain the 'choices' that young people report making.

In the final chapter I bring together the analytical themes discussed in this and the previous chapter. I address the research questions and the extent to which the findings have illuminated the experiences, understandings and meanings held by young people over their post-16 transition. I consider the contribution of the research to the field of research into post-16 transitions and hard to reach young people in which it is located. Drawing upon this chapter and chapter four I show that I have contributed to knowledge by: challenging some existing typologies used to theorise the post-16 transition; presenting evidence against assumptions that certain school experiences can lead to persistent 'negative' learning identities affecting the post-16 transition; highlighting that there is much similarity between the post-16 transitions of young people identified as 'hard to reach' and wider cohorts of young people. In the final chapter I highlight the strengths and limitations of the current study. I also revisit the context outlined

in the first chapter, suggesting where the findings have implications for policy and practice, particularly with regard to 14-19 education reforms and the raising of the participation age.

## Chapter six

### 6. Conclusion

#### 6.1 The current study

This study explored the experiences and understandings of young people over their post-16 transitions. The 51 participants were all identified as 'hard to reach' during their final years of compulsory schooling, 14 of whom were interviewed on three occasions over a three year period. Drawing upon grounded theory method and analysis I sought to capture the full range of issues and experiences of meaning to young people as they lived out their lives aged between 14 and 18 years old. This allowed for a theoretical understanding of young people who experience the post-16 transition, whilst capturing far more than the educational journey itself.

In chapter one I outlined the rationale for this research, which centred around the raising of the age of participation in education and training in England to 18 in 2015 (Education and Skills Act, 2008) and the need for more detailed understanding of young people's lives. This research therefore represents one of the last chances to explore the post-16 transition while destinations out of education and training (NEET and JWT) are permissible<sup>1</sup>. This is an original piece of research in an under-researched area; few peer reviewed articles have focused upon the post-16 transition and no recent longitudinal research has studied 'hard to reach' young people across their post-16 transition. This research therefore represents a unique insight into the unfolding lives and social milieu of young people who were considered 'hard to reach' at school. The study aimed to address the following research questions:

- a) What are the interests and experiences of young people identified as hard to reach at school, across their post-16 transition?
- b) What meanings and understandings do these young people hold regarding their post-16 transitions?

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<sup>1</sup> Appendix XI shows the post-16 destinations for young people interviewed on two occasions.

In this concluding chapter I synthesise the research that I have undertaken and consider the extent to which the above research questions, and the aim to elucidate the post-16 transition of a sample of school pupils, who were identified as 'hard to reach' during Key Stage 5 of their UK education, have been addressed. In doing so I make explicit the originality and contribution to knowledge of the study before ending with the implications of the work conducted.

In chapter two I explored the issue of labelling. 'Hard to reach' was selected amongst other terms, for example disaffected and marginalised, as it was considered non-pejorative and a suitably heterogeneous term covering a range of young people. I reviewed literature that has sought to understand other 'hard to reach' young people, including those labelled according to the policy constructs NEET and JWT. Following on from this I critically discussed key studies that have investigated the post-16 transition.

In order to address the qualitative nature of the research questions, I explained the need for an interpretive methodology (chapter 3). I justified my use of grounded theory as the methodology most suited to interpreting the understandings and meanings of young people. However, this methodological and analytical framework was applied in an original flexible way to the particular needs of the study. For instance, a longitudinal design was a critical feature of the current study, but is at odds with some of the hallmarks of classic post-positivist grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews were the method which fit the methodological assumptions, while they allowed analysis to be grounded in the voice of the young people. The strengths and limitations of the methodological framework employed are further considered later in this chapter.

The analytical framework used drew upon case study, narrative inquiry and primarily grounded theory. The analytical framework was used flexibly, in order to fit the needs of this particular study rather than adhering to particular analysis guidelines (e.g. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I used certain strategies like in-vivo coding, theoretical coding and memo-writing (Charmaz, 2006) as part of my analysis. Principles such as theoretical sampling and constant comparison

guided my approach and helped to ensure the findings were grounded in the data collected. However, rather than present a grounded theory per se, complete with a core category describing the process behind a phenomenon (e.g. Glaser, 1992), I used conventions of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to present my findings under four themes. In the following section I summarise the analysis and discussion chapters drawing relations amongst the four themes therein.

## 6.2 Summary of findings

Ahead of considering analytical themes in chapter four I considered the characteristics of the sample who were all identified as 'hard to reach' by school practitioners and whether the participants were labelled. The young people often shared four characteristics: truancy, behavioural problems, disaffection and exclusion. Outside of school the young people held some characteristics in common with those of disaffected young people reported elsewhere (Holroyd & Armour, 2003). There were more differences across participants in these out of school factors than the school based characteristics. However, participants' narratives showed that the out of school factors impacted their school experience in a typically delimiting way.

One of the interesting findings from the study was that the young people were aware of labels and their associations. For example, several spoke of their '*bad reputation[s]*' (James, Year 11) with teachers at school. However, rather than assuming the identity of the label or ascription (Becker, 1967), they perceived themselves as asserting control or agency over their own destinies.

The first analytical theme discussed in chapter four, *School and learning identities*, revealed that seemingly 'negative' learning identities (Rees et al., 1997) which young people appeared to attribute to their experiences at school did not predict post-16 transitions away from learning. Moreover, learning in a different environment or training post-16 was considered a fresh start in a more adult atmosphere and even those who pursued other post-16 destinations often returned to learning or training later with seeming positivity:

*My NVQ is a lot better than school... this is what I want to do, I didn't enjoy school at all, this is something that I enjoy (Zara, 3/3, Year 13, 2010).*

It seems that learning identities are often at their strongest when aligned with career identities, meaning that young people find the learning most purposeful and report it being most enjoyable when it relates to their future career aspirations:

*You're studying something you want to ... At school, you have to do every lesson don't you, but here [college] the skills you do (.) its useful if you want to be in the police and for my CV as well (Kirsty, 2/3, Year 12, 2009).*

The second analytical theme discussed in chapter four was *Imagined futures*. Various narratives showed that the young people had different types of imagined futures ranging from occupational goals to generic milestones. Some participants held dreams, while others appeared not to be considering their future.

A key contribution of my analysis is an appreciation that young people's imagined futures change over time; these changes are often unpredictable. Rather than assume that young people's imagined futures are unrealistic plans distant from their current lives (Quinn et al., 2008), seeing imagined futures as in transition captures for instance how dreams can become incorporated in occupational goals. Bethany, whose case is cited in Chapter four, provides a good example:

*I want to do stuff with it [Hairdressing] like go travelling ... I'd like to go anywhere, but I'd just like to start off in Australia (Bethany, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

In chapter five, the analytical theme *Transformations, turning points and the post-16 transition*, was discussed revealing that the post-16 transition itself is rarely a critical turning point for young people. Rather, the extended post-16 transition is a fragile and fragmented experience. Findings revealed similarities between the transitions of this sample and those who typically moved from school to FE reported elsewhere (Bloomer & Hodgkinson, 1999). The transcripts demonstrate that change and transformation is ongoing for these young people.

The experience of the post-16 transition for the young people is individual, unpredictable and multifaceted. Kurt's narrative considered in chapter five demonstrates that turning points, such as taking an overdose, do not necessarily lead to transformation:

*I was going out with him for five months, I had really strong feelings for him.  
And then to have it like took away, it really hurt.  
[...] I was an idiot for doing it ... cos it really wasn't worth it, its got easier  
yeah (Kurt, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

On the other hand, Jonathan's narrative also discussed in chapter five, demonstrates how various specific turning points may trigger one another and seemingly lead to a transformation, which he understood as working, staying out of trouble and being supported. Both Kurt and Jonathan show that the changes unfolding over the extended post-16 transition go beyond education and career trajectories.

One thing that was striking in the previous literature was how often researchers referred to young peoples' 'choice' at the end of school unproblematically. In a similar vein the participants often spoke about their choices without acknowledgement of the impact of a range of structural influences apparent in their narratives. Therefore, the fourth and final analytical theme, *Constrained choices – Structure versus agency*, considered young people's constrained choices and the interplay of their perceived agency and structure upon their decisions.

It was clear from Kirsty and others' experiences that a range of structural influences including class, gender, family, peers, and the local labour market can be seen to more often than not constrain the 'choices' that young people report making. These young people may differ from other samples of young people in terms of the level of constraint experienced. They would all likely be considered members of working class families, which itself is shown to be a constraint in terms of both opportunity and the careers they are exposed to (cf. Reay & Ball, 1997).

Structure and agency is a theoretical conception that could be considered a superordinate theme, given its relevance to several other the arguments posed

across the findings chapters. For instance, characteristics of the young people such as relocating can be seen as a structure which impacted on young people's experience of school and their wider lives. Furthermore, given that school often took on an identity itself for the young people, characterised for example by '*Yeah I still hate school, it does my head in, grumpy, miserable teachers always having a go*' (Imogen, Year 11), it can be seen as a structure affecting the young people's decision making. However, as mentioned above, this structure did not put participants off undertaking future learning. Young people's *transformations* and *turning points* can on one hand be indicative of the multitude of structures impacting young people in transition, but then differences in terms of the impact of turning points and examples of pragmatic rational decision making as seen elsewhere in the research literature suggest some measure of agency on the part of hard to reach young people.

### **6.3 Contribution to Knowledge**

The findings make a contribution to existing knowledge in a variety of ways. I do find support for previous theorising suggesting similarities between the experiences of the young people identified as 'hard to reach' and more general cohorts of young people sampled in other studies, implying that they are not that different from other young people. However, I show that young people's post-16 transitions and the aspirations they hold are more nuanced than would be anticipated on the basis of previous theorising. My findings also challenge several assumptions seen in previous literature, such as negative learning identities developed in school affecting future learning and vague aspirations or unrealistic fantasy futures being typical for young people.

Perhaps the most important contribution to knowledge made by this study is also its simplest. Taken holistically the post-16 transitions of these young people, identified as 'hard to reach' at school are similar to the experiences of other samples of young people reported in previous literature (e.g. Ball et al., 2000; Lawy et al., 2010). This study provides confirmatory evidence for these and other previous studies of the post-16 transition. For instance decision making around the post-16 transition for the young people in the current study

could often be characterised as pragmatically rational given that narratives implied choices were influenced by feelings, emotions and preferences (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997):

*My ambition is to get into estate agency, but with the credit crunch going on its not really a good business to get into yet, so like what I want to do is keep with this sort of job [hospitality] until the credit crunch is over firstly, and then like maybe think about going into estate agents, like doing a course that is based around estate agency, so I've got some qualifications (Jasmin, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

This pragmatic rational decision making has been attributed to young people in numerous studies considering youth transitions (e.g. Ball et al., 1999; Stokes & Wyn, 2007; Walker, 2007; Lawy et al., 2009). Likewise, happenstance, drift and resilience were seen as key characteristics of some of the young people's experiences of the post-16 transition, again supporting the interpretation of previous research (e.g. Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999; Smyth & Hattam, 2004; Ungar, 2004).

I would argue that as much difference can be seen among the transitions within my sample as can be seen between their experiences and that reported elsewhere (e.g. Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999; Ball et al., 2000). The transitions of young people in the current study may be typically fragile and complex, related to background characteristics such as family breakdown and violence identified as impacting upon their experiences. Yet their transitions are protracted, fragmented and unpredictable, therefore matching the view of contemporary youth transitions as a whole (Stokes & Wynn, 2007).

I challenge two heuristic typologies as part of my analysis; Ball et al.'s (1999) three types of imagined future and Bloomer and Hodkinson's (1997) three types of learning career, seen to apply to the post-16 transition. While each set of authors are clear that their typology is arbitrary, other work has used and cited this theorising, particularly Ball et al.'s conception of imagined futures. In chapter four I showed that young people's aspirations were more nuanced than Ball et al.'s typology would permit. I gave four flexible types of imagined futures that captured the different aspirations seen across participants:

1. Occupational goals – for example, Kurt’s aspirations to *‘open my own salon’*;
2. Dreams – for example, Imogen’s dream to *‘live in Spain or somewhere hot’*;
3. Generic milestones – for example, Adam’s goal to have *‘my own house and car’*;
4. No imagined future – for example, Kirsty’s prerogative of *‘I’m just taking it step by step’*.

Furthermore, my longitudinal design and focus upon participants interviewed on three occasions within the findings chapters meant I could show that young people’s imagined futures are in transition. Rather than categorising young people, I acknowledged that young people’s aspirations change over time and move between the four types.

In chapter five I found support for Bloomer and Hodkinson’s (1997) typology of learning career applying to the post-16 transitions of young people in the current study; given the broad categories of ‘little or no change’, ‘sudden transformations’ and ‘gradual evolution’. This was found despite these authors focussing more upon educational transitions than I did here. Jacob’s experience appears to fit the ‘little or no change’ type:

*With college it was like I would of had to get up in the mornings and go Barrtown, which is like nah I couldn’t do it  
[...] I sort of decided I didn’t want to go. Thought it would be easier to get a job to be honest  
[...]. I haven’t tried that hard (Jacob, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

But this simplistic theorisation neglects the drift that more aptly explained Jacob’s position post-16 and fails to dissociate Jacob from other young people for whom little or no change may indicate a smooth post-16 transition (Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997).

Kurt’s learning career appeared to show a ‘gradual evolution’ as he moved towards his occupational goal of hairdressing. However, again, this type fails to recognise the complexity of young people’s transitions. Kurt was characterised as experiencing a dual transition, where his progress towards his career

aspiration played against the fragility of his transition in terms of his sexual identity:

*I was going to wait [to come out] until the end of school, but cos I told my Dad I thought it was best I tell everyone  
[...] Some people reacted more when they found out it was actually true ... people shouting abuse like faggot and stuff like that (Kurt, 1/3, 2008, Year 11).*

Through my analysis I was also able to challenge some of the assumptions seen in the literature. One assumption in the literature is that learning identities 'damaged' at school impact post-16 decision making and a young person's disposition to learning in the future (e.g. Ball et al, 1999). In chapter four I concluded on the basis of my analysis of the theme, *School and learning identities* that this was not the case for nearly my entire sample. Young people typically viewed FE as a fresh start in a more adult environment and even those who 'don't enjoy school at all' (Zara, Year 11) and initially move out of education at 16 frequently return to education or training, speaking with positivity of the learning:

*I think it was just it took a while getting used to being back in school surroundings, I didn't like being told what to do, but I get on with the teachers really, really well there [college], so that helped me enjoy it a bit more.  
[...] I really enjoy it there now. I find doing the work, even that I grew to like it (Jasmin, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Atkins (2009) used the term 'fantasy future' to refer to young peoples' distant dreams: typically unplanned and relatively unobtainable. Atkins provides supporting evidence that these dreams often involve sudden transformations to wealth and celebrity, whereas Lawy (2002a) suggests that such obfuscation may be indicative of a lack of both narrative of the self and access to normatively defined success criteria held by young people. No such vague or unrealistic aspirations that bear 'little or no relation to the reality of their lives' (Quinn et al., 2008, p. 192), was seen among the young people in the current study. Where their imagined futures could be considered as fantasies they were dreams linked to their interests or career goals:

*I want to go travelling, what I'm hoping to do is go on a cruise ship and do hairdressing, something like that, get away from Countyshire (Bethany, 2/3, 2009, Year 12).*

On the rare occasion that young people's dreams corresponded to careers that allow for fame, for example a rugby player (Joseph) or model (Lauren), they had still taken steps towards their dreams, having trials with a rugby club and getting portfolio pictures respectively.

## **6.4 Reflections**

In this section I reflect upon the research undertaken primarily in terms of the strengths and limitations of the study and the personal journey which I found myself taking while conducting this research. There is no doubt that I myself have experienced a transition over the course of this research. In chapter one I outlined how I came to study education after graduating in psychology. This understandably shaped my preconceptions regarding young people's development and learning, as well as the methods I was familiar using. I was much more comfortable with quantitative research and its analysis in advance of this study. Indeed, my Masters in Educational Research was the first time I had heard of Grounded Theory Method. I really had to learn the ways of interpretive research and particularly its analysis and presentation of findings. This took some time, but I believe the hard work has paid off.

The strengths and limitations I consider below summarise and expand upon a range of methodological issues considered already in chapter three. As such, the range of points considered does not represent all possible evaluative points and are discussed briefly. I do show that a range of methodological choices can at once lead to both strengths and limitations of the research.

A strength of this research was that it aimed to focus upon the transition of young people considered 'hard to reach'. As such the focus is more defined than previous research which has considered the post-16 transition of young people as a whole (e.g. Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1997). 'Hard to reach' was preferred as a term because it is a non-pejorative and likewise the research did

not assume that the young people were problematic on account only of practitioners' labelling as part of the selection of the sample. However, the label corresponding to risk of not participating post-16, meant these were potentially the young people for whom RPA would have the greatest effect, thus filling a gap in the research literature.

A strength of the research was its longitudinal data collection and the participation of the same participants over three academic years. Asking practitioners to consider pupils under achieving and unlikely to make a positive progression has been used successfully in other recent, similar studies (cf. Archer, Hollingworth & Mendick, 2010). This broad means of recruitment avoided a homogenous group perhaps selected in terms of low ability or behavioural issues exclusively. I might have collected data over a shorter time period, but wanted to maximise the length of transitions that the study captured.

However, in other ways the sample was limited. Two cohorts of young people participated in order that data collection could capture two years before and two years after the end of school at 16 for the sample as a whole. If time was not limited to three academic years, then using one cohort followed for four years or more would have of course been preferable. Potentially the hardest to reach young people in the last two years of school were not available to participate. Only those attending a school were recruited. I was keen to include a long-term non-attender who was on the roll at one school, but the school was reluctant to contact the young person's family on my behalf. Likewise, two participants in cohort two could not be interviewed a second time in Year 11 as they were off their school's roll, presumably home educated (Webb, 2011). Those young people with recognised special educational needs and support for this were not included in the sample. These young people may not be hard to reach given the support put in place for those with a statement<sup>1</sup>, comparatively their transition experience is quite well researched (e.g. Polat, Kalambouka, Boyle & Nelson 2001).

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<sup>1</sup> Those young people receiving support for their needs as part of school action and school action plus were included.

Analysis was grounded in the data and therefore the voice of the young people. Semi-structured to unstructured interviews were used in order to give the young people the opportunity to express their experiences and understandings. Young people typically engaged with the interviews; the 94 interviews ranging from 40 minutes to 135 minutes. An hour was typically planned for and the average interview lasted around this length. Conducting the sensitising study in advance of this research helped. It was beneficial not only in terms of pointing toward the research problem, but also in improving my interview technique. The first interview conducted during the sensitising study lasted just fifteen minutes. However, I improved my open questioning and benefitted from the opportunity to interview young people that were not hard to reach, gaining experience in conducting interviews that lasted over an hour.

I soon found that the amount of data collected was hard to manage. As per grounded theory method I was analysing data soon after the interviews were conducted and using ongoing analysis to inform further data collection. With 51 interviews conducted in 2008, staying organised amidst collecting data, transcribing interviews, coding transcripts and considering further data collection was a tall order. While I could have utilised more data in this thesis or conducted more interviews in the second and third year of data collection, the decision to restrict the data collected and ultimately focus upon 11 cases throughout the analysis allowed a balance of diversity to be seen amongst the young people and enough detail to build a narrative picture of the lives of certain young people amongst the sample. This strategy followed that used elsewhere (e.g. Ball et al., 2000; Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999).

I read much around both the context of the research and previous literature related to the research problem. Not all of this research is cited in the thesis. While this is primarily a personal characteristic and an outcome of having the time during this doctoral study to read the literature in full, it was not always a positive thing. For instance I spent much time reading and understanding the various grounded theory method texts, ultimately coming to realise that the method ought to be used flexibly and that more post-positivist texts offered more contradiction than useable methodological or analytical techniques (Thomas & James, 2006). Of course classic grounded theory suggests that too

much reading in advance of research can cloud preconceptions and taint theoretical sensitivity (Glaser, 1978). However, I and others (e.g. Hallberg, 2006) would argue that a broad knowledge of related theory enhances theoretical sensitivity, meaning prior background reading allowed me to see certain issues within the data such as imagined futures and transformations. I was aware of these theoretical constructs, but did not search for them in the data; I was merely reminded of this related literature as I analysed the data and subsequently read in more detail on the basis of these findings (Urquhart, 2007).

That said, a thorough understanding of grounded theory and its post-positivist roots allowed for the flexible use of some more constructivist grounded theory principles. I selected those strategies and hallmarks of grounded theory that aided the investigation of my research problem with longitudinal data collection. Not all of the characteristic components of grounded theory fitted with the analysis that unfolded. While some could argue that the key characteristic of grounded theory is the production of a mid-range substantive theory. I found during my analysis that little value would have come from fitting my core categories to one basic social process, that process would have surrounded transition and transformation and dominated an analysis which as presented thematically contributes a range of theoretical ideas which could be related to literature in the field. This *use* of grounded theory has been seen widely in the key literature cited in this thesis (e.g. Ball et al., 2000).

This was a small scale study. While 11 schools were represented by pupils that practitioners considered 'hard to reach' and a mix of rural and urban settings were sampled, the shared context limits the extent to which experiences would be held by other young people elsewhere. The geographical setting of the study has a relatively narrow post-16 market with only one FE College and two sixth forms rarely attended by those who were not already at the school. It is also ethnically homogenous.

Reliability and validity were never the aims of the current study, given its interpretive methodology. With a small sample and particular context, generalisation was not the goal; rather authenticity and credibility as measures

of the quality of this type of research were important (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). My open interviewing technique, probing for more detail on any unfamiliar data, grounding analysis in the data and conducting member checks with two participants helped to enhance the credibility and authenticity of the findings.

A key strength of the study was the lower than anticipated sample attrition. I had assumed on the basis of previous similar research (e.g. Maguire et al., 2008; Lawy et al., 2010) that these participants would often drop out or be uncontactable when it came time for subsequent interviews. Therefore I took many contact details including the phone number of a friend or relative who lived elsewhere. I was staggered by the frequency with which young people changed their mobile phone numbers within a year, but relying on other means of communication like email and home phone numbers meant I was frequently able to get in touch with particular participants. This meant that I was often able to select those participants that my theoretical sampling suggested were particularly important to the ongoing analysis. Remuneration may have aided this low drop out, although many participants were surprised when they were reminded of the payment for completing interviews outside of school.

In hindsight I might have commenced the study with fewer participants, but at the time I was still adjusting to undertaking interpretive research. Having said that, I considered it important to anticipate the likelihood of sample attrition over time on the basis of other researchers' experiences (e.g. Maguire et al., 2008). Having in mind that retaining participants and particularly a diverse sample of key participants interviewed over three academic years probably encouraged me to both prepare well in terms of collecting contact details and being suitably persistent when attempting to contact young people. The key things I believe led to the very low actual drop out was ensuring participants were clear as to the purpose of the study, aided by meeting individuals in advance of the first interview to build rapport and answer questions outside of the interview situation. Taking a positive and proactive approach to contacting and interviewing participants surely helped. Practitioners were sceptical that *these* young people would interview well, but most appeared or stated that they found participating rewarding, it was clear that speaking to someone about their experiences and how they understood their lives was found useful. Finally

appreciating that these young people may forget about interviews and are unlikely to return phone messages and therefore rearranging interviews and trying to telephone them again was key to retaining the sample.

## 6.5 Implications

When I started my doctoral study I was interested in the particular experiences of hard to reach young people following my sensitising study, and had identified a gap in the literature for such research. Since these initial plans, this study and issues surrounding young people's participation have become very topical. Initially in this section I frame the findings of this study in the ongoing socio-economic and political context. I first consider the context surrounding preparation for RPA in 2013 and 2015. Later I consider the economic context in the UK, which particularly in terms of youth unemployment has worsened since the young people reported here were leaving school during the recession of 2008 and 2009.

As was mentioned in chapter one, RPA has received less credence in political debate since 2010. Still though, as part of the Spending Review and the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010b), the UK Government confirmed its commitment to raise the participation age to 18 in 2015 in England. The Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition has made clearer its stance on enforcement; it is currently legislating as part of the 2011 Education Bill to delay the introduction of the enforcement process against young people and their parents, believing that full participation ought to be achievable without the need for penalty.

35 local authorities in England have been involved in delivering 22 local delivery trials, developing approaches to increasing participation and delivering RPA. The full report making recommendations on the basis of these trials is due to be published in the Summer of 2012, which one might argue leaves little time for implementation ahead of the participation age raising to 17 in 2013. However, it is of interest that the evaluation reports published thus far present findings and

recommendations showing similarities to the current study (Isos Partnership 2010, 2011).

For instance, the more recent report highlights the need to support young people during their transitions, but over an extended period from Key Stage 3 rather than only at the turning point at the end of school (Isos Partnership, 2011). The report speaks of the need to identify those at risk of disengaging, whereas the current study has shown that those labelled hard to reach do not necessarily disengage. Identifying young people at risk of non-participation is a difficult to impossible task. The report also recommends transforming JWT into apprenticeships. This sweeping recommendation is surely a very challenging proposition reliant on engaging employers who currently do not offer young employees accredited training, which also dismisses the positive value found here and elsewhere (e.g. Lawy et al., 2009) that young people experience when engaged in JWT. There appears to be no recent policy shift away from JWT being considered a deficit category (Lawy et al., 2010).

The RPA trial evaluation recommends more research like the current study aiming to understand the cohort at risk of not participating utilising 'in-depth research' (Isos Partnership, 2010, p. 36). However, I highlighted in chapter one that the window is closing through which to understand these young people and their extended transitions ahead of RPA.

In comparing 2011 to when I commenced this research it appears that effort and funding is now being placed into supporting participation ahead of RPA rather than tackling NEETs. When this research commenced the young people in this study had the opportunity to partake in interventions such as activity agreements designed for persistent NEETs, something that Jacob experienced in Year 12 albeit with limited apparent benefit:

*Connexions sort of put me onto it, they set up tasks for you to do each week like go to the gym ... maybe like going for a meeting to talk to your supervisor man about stuff ... But I've missed out [on the EMA payment] cos I always don't go to some appointment or something like that (Jacob, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

While an Activity Agreement did not seem to impact Jacob, a government cut that would have seemingly affected many of the young people in the current study is the removal of EMA payments for FE students starting their post-16 studies from September 2011. EMA was mentioned by participants in over half of all interviews, primarily as a reason for considering college and as an important payment once there:

*EMA is like the one thing I really want to get ... I suppose it probably would make a difference to what I decide for next year (Chloe, 2/3, 2009, Year 11).*

The second contextual issue, also of relevance to plans for RPA, is the wider economic uncertainty that the UK, amongst many other countries, is continuing to face. The UK recession of 2008-2009 was something that was mentioned as part of the context of the current study (chapter 1) but was also acknowledged by participants, for example:

*Cos of the whole credit crunch and are we in recession and stuff, means you need to do further education I think, there aren't many jobs in Grimshaw (Chloe, 2/3, 2009, Year 11).*

In late 2011 the UK is under threat of experiencing a 'double dip', returning again to recession. Youth unemployment has continued to rise as predicted by Birdwell et al. (2011) amongst others. At the end of September 2011 nearly a million young people in the UK (16-24 year olds) were unemployed (Elliott, 2011). At nearly one fifth of young people, those who do not participate are by no means a minority. As UK youth unemployment is predicted to rise past one million by the end of 2011, it is the case that those young people often considered hard to reach, excluded, marginalised et cetera on the basis of employment opportunities are increasing in number, becoming both more prominent and of greater concern. Even if all young people were to participate in education or training to 18, it would be a fallacy to assume this would lead to employment at 18 years of age. Given that social exclusion has often been related to youth unemployment (e.g. MacDonald & Marsh, 2001), the issue of one million young people unemployed is far more pervasive than a lack of work.

A key finding of the current study was that the post-16 transition of my 'hard to reach' participants was similar to that seen in previous research with young

people not so labelled (e.g. Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999) or labelled in other ways (e.g. JWT, Lawy et al., 2010). Their aspirations, interests and transformations are not qualitatively different to that reported elsewhere (e.g. Bloomer & Hodkinson, 1999) and are not by any means firmly positioned at the 'no imagined futures', 'disengagement', 'excluded' end of the spectrum of youth experiences. Where my sample may differ from young people more generally is in the level of constraint experienced, for example in terms of family breakdown and involvement in crime; other structural constraints identified such as the current economic context suggest the transition from education to work is becoming increasingly difficult regardless of the age at which it occurs and the background of young people. The impact of various young people's experience of the currently restricting job market therefore requires research.

'Hard to reach' young people are not a homogenous subsection of society, although continued misguided labelling risks perpetuating this myth. The young people in the current study were labelled by practitioners as unlikely to make a 'positive progression', by society as 'troublesome teens', and by policy as 'at risk' of non-participation. These labels, although experienced and understood by the young people to a certain degree, were not self-fulfilling prophecies as they saw themselves as having agency and making choices, despite the constraining structures that can be seen all too easily in their narratives and which do set them apart from middle class young people researched elsewhere (e.g. du Bois Reymond, 1998). This conflict between young people's agency as opposed to the structural constraints that limit their perceived 'choices' is worthy of further research.

School for many of the young people was considered a negative experience, marked by clashes with teachers, other pupils, truancy and very often an ill-conceived assumption of failure. Despite this, young people were not put off learning, able to dissociate a school identity from their learning identity and therefore often embrace learning in a different sphere. This holds implications in terms of RPA, particularly if young people could feel forced to remain in similar education until 18 years of age. What was found to be critical to the apparent positivity young people expressed regarding their later moves back into learning

and training was that it was clearly career-orientated, helping them with their job or career plan.

Interestingly many young people came to regret their behaviour and achievements at school, for example:

*If I could just go back and do them [GCSEs], I'd do them now. Cos it's not hard to sit in a room for an hour or two is it? (Jacob, 3/3, 2010, Year 12).*

This must hold implications for the experience of lower achieving school pupils. At the end of Year 11 Jacob decided not to attend his GCSE exams, but in hindsight he would have wanted to improve his results. This hindsight plays against admittance by many of the young people that their GCSEs have not been a critical passport to jobs or subsequent learning. Furthermore many of the young people reported attempts to 'buck down' in Year 11 to gain qualifications, although with various outcomes. This changing disposition towards their qualifications at school warrants further exploration.

The English Baccalaureate<sup>1</sup> performance measure may perpetuate the problem revealed by findings in the current study that schools may give young people the impression that a C grade at GCSE is the benchmark for a pass. It may be that schools reinforcing that a C grade is needed to pass has a deleterious affect on the attainment of lower grades which after all are still GCSE pass grades, despite young people not always being aware of this:

*I did fail every single subject, that's what I done ... I could spell fudge except the U, no the E with my grades HHH (Zara, 3/3, 2010, Year 13).*

Given the amount with which young people in the current study indicated their preference for practical learning at school, programmes such as those offered by the new University Technical Colleges and Studio Schools (Edge, 2010) may provide an alternative to the academic focus of the English Baccalaureate. However, both are in their relative infancy, their longer term impact as yet unmeasured. Neither was available within the area participants resided in.

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<sup>1</sup> Those who achieve a grade C or above GCSE results in maths, English, a science, a language and geography or history are considered to have achieved an English Baccalaureate.

Other research has drawn recommendations in terms of Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG). Given that the transitions of young people here and elsewhere are complex and their aspirations change over time, any services need to be flexible and not provide support that is age-dependent as young people make decisions at different points in time and also re-evaluate their decisions. It is clear that previously held policy assumptions regarding young people choosing vocational aspirations at 13 and 14 years of age ahead of pursuing 14-19 vocational diplomas were naïve (Leigh, 2008).

Although my research sampled young people to the age of 18, it was clear from final interviews with young people at this age looking ahead to their third year post-16 that as much advice and guidance is needed here as at 16 years of age. Several young people including James and Dominic were planning on change as they moved into what would be Year 14. Perhaps a positive effect of RPA will be more focus upon the transition at 18 years of age both in a research and IAG sense. Nevertheless, the key implication is that young people make their constrained career choices across a variety of ages and often reassess these plans. IAG needs to be perceptive to the constraints and maintain flexibility in its services.

RPA in 2015 aims to remove non-participation as a post-16 destination for young people; meaning young people will no longer be permitted to move into JWT. However, the current study found some support for research that considered the experience of young people in JWT (e.g. Quinn et al., 2008; Maguire, 2010). Young people do learn while in a job that does not offer any formal accredited training and recognise that skills developed will assist them beyond their current work. The policy recommendation suggested above that JWT can become apprenticeship places is unwieldy and would require both investment and a culture change amongst employers who currently hire young people without offering them accredited training. Moreover with youth unemployment approaching one million in the UK, JWT should surely not be seen as a deficit category by policy and in practice.

RPA may mean that policy labels such as NEET and JWT no longer need to be used, alleviating the problem reported in various research cited in this thesis

that the terms homogenised what were potentially very different situations, experiences and young people. However, forced participation will surely create one group of non-participants with the solution seen as participation. Policy needs to reframe the prevailing negative view of young people who have found work but do not have training at Level 2 or part-time education. At a time of record youth employment, young people securing a job ought to be celebrated rather than vilified from 2015. There is much evidence here and elsewhere that young people both learn from work experience and can be valued employees. RPA as it stands will only serve to render job opportunities for 16 and 17 year olds rarer. Apprenticeships have long been seen as the favoured work based learning route for young people. Despite guarantees regarding apprenticeship places for young people, evidence suggests that positions are more frequently taken by more experienced and qualified older people.

While the research and current economic climate suggests RPA should not seek to eradicate JWT, it is clear that policy needs to address careers advice for young people. The current position sees a fragmented former Connexions service operating for young people aged 13-19, whereas the failure of 14-19 vocational diplomas has, amongst other reasons, shown again that assumptions regarding young people choosing their “career” at 13-14 years of age are unfounded. If RPA or other policy promotes a model where young people start full-time work at 18 years of age, careers advice needs to be both flexible but concentrating on older youth. It is young people, who are not participating, amongst the one million unemployed who need careers guidance, meaning that such a service cannot rely upon alignment with schools and colleges to assist those young people with the greatest need.

It is widely assumed that 100% participation to 18 years of age will not occur, even before the Conservative-Liberal Democrat UK Government’s decision not to enforce RPA at least initially. Therefore future research should again consider the longitudinal experiences of young people who may be considered likely not to participate. In order to further understand their lives and critically their understandings and meanings. Such research should collect data from young people for several years after school, given that 18 years of age ought to be a clear transition point and this study found that young people at this age, i.e.

two years beyond school were still often contemplating transformations in terms of their participation at this time.

This study has revealed that on one hand the experiences of young people considered 'hard to reach' were in keeping with those transitions reported for young people elsewhere. On the other hand, my findings revealed a more nuanced picture of the way in which the experiences and understandings of young people can be theorised, challenging some assumptions made about young people's learning and aspirations. Yet more research is needed to understand further the experiences and interests of young people at the peripheries of participation. Without continued research attention upon a more considered understanding of the heterogeneity of their lives, policy decisions may continue to be founded upon misplaced assumptions about hard to reach young people and their risk of non-participation post-16.

## Appendices

### Appendix I – Contact sheet for practitioners:

Darren Moore

University of Exeter

PhD Research

#### The experience of post-16 transitions for hard to reach learners in North Countyshire

##### Selecting Year 10s to participate in the research

Hard to reach learners are those students that are not gaining as much as they could from the learning experience. They are not reaching their potential and at the current point in time a positive post-16 transition is felt to be unlikely by those that work with the student. The reason that these young people are hard to reach may be diverse and/or can be unclear.

##### What we are working towards

A 50-60 minute 1-to-1 interview with 4 of your Year 10s to take place in January and February 2008.

Initially though, I am asking you to please gather a list of Year 10 students that could be considered 'hard to reach'. I then propose that I meet with you between the 21<sup>st</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> November, in order that we can select several pupils from the list that would be suitable to ask to participate, given the types of hard to reach learners that are participating from other schools.

I am labelling my participants hard to reach as they are also hard to reach in terms of research. This kind of pupil is unlikely to be selected in more general studies, perhaps because they are assumed to be difficult to interview. Therefore please do not leave pupils off the list because you do not think they will respond well in an interview situation.

##### Summary

Basically if someone at the school has recognised that a Year 10 is either not reaching their potential and/or has an uncertain future they should be included on this initial list regardless of the specific reasons for this.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me and please get in touch to arrange meeting to go through your list of Year 10s towards the end of the month:

dmoore@###.ac.uk

01### ###021 (Tue & Wed)

07### ###859

**Appendix II – Parental consent form:**



**School of Education and Lifelong Learning**

Dear Parent/Carer

As part of my postgraduate studies at the University of Exeter I am conducting some research into the experiences of pupils in North Devon as they move from Year 10 into Year 11 and beyond school. As part of the research I would like to interview your son or daughter about their thoughts and feelings in Year 10. I would then hope to carry out a similar interview in the Autumn term of Year 11.

All of the schools I have approached have been very supportive and will be interested in the findings of this research. While tutors think this interview will be useful and believe it will be a positive experience for your son/daughter, I wanted to check with you and your son/daughter before going ahead with the first interview at your son/daughter's School or College in January or February.

Participation of your son/daughter is completely voluntary and they will be given the option not to participate themselves and to withdraw at any time. For now please let me know by returning the attached slip to your son/daughter's tutor or Head of Year, indicating whether you are happy for them to participate.

If you have any further questions please ask your son/daughter's tutor in the first instance.

Yours faithfully

Darren Moore

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To whom it may concern

I do / do not\* give permission for my son/daughter \_\_\_\_\_

tutor group \_\_\_\_\_ to participate in the interviews with Darren Moore.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

\* Please delete as appropriate



## **Appendix IV – Interview III schedule:**

Bethany - Interview 3, Year 13

We will probably spend about 15 minutes on what has happened since last year, 15 minutes on some questions related to last time and then 15 minutes on questions on the kind of important things that the research is telling me.

What kind of things have happened since we last spoke?

Some questions about what you said last time:

Enjoy apprenticeship, but hard work. Definitely what wanted to do.  
Only cleaning, washing, reception etc Boring, better when cut and colour

Key Skills as part of apprenticeship

Learn more in salon than you would at school or training. Would not learn if writing.

Nervous when started new place?

Still like work rather than student?

No good friends at work.

Did not get on with manager

Long hours and poor money?

Training now?

How did leaving Apprenticeship compare to end of school?

Commitment to choice:  
Why do you think you have stuck with ...  
Why did it change.

Still wish GCSEs were better?  
What grade do you need to pass GCSEs?

Driving, thought might get car for 18<sup>th</sup>?

Still going out as much?

How have you changed since last year?  
Last year said more independent and confident?

Back at school we talked about teenagers, do you consider yourself an adult now?  
When would you?

Have your friends changed since last year? Why?

Gym?

How has your relationship with Mum changed since last year?  
Parents? Dad cares for Mum.

Still not into relationships?

Why do you think your school chose you for this research?

Stay with salon after apprenticeship?

Beauty in future?

Tell me about your plans for the future.

If we were to speak next year, what things do you hope you would be telling me about?

Last year you told me you wanted to work on cruise ship, have you thought more about that?

Not own salon?

Where do you see yourself in ...?

Travelling, Australia or New Zealand

**Appendix V – Participant contact details sheet**

Thanks for taking part in my research.

To give yourself the option of taking part after Year 11, I need as much contact details as possible so I can definitely get in touch with you next year.

This doesn't mean that you have to take part in the future, you will still have the option of saying no when I contact you.

Interviews after Year 11 will receive a payment of £15 for your time.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Home phone number \_\_\_\_\_

Mobile number \_\_\_\_\_

Email addresses \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Name of someone else not at your home address who you will keep in touch with

\_\_\_\_\_

Their phone number/address/email

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix VI – Timeline of research

This figure displays the timeline of the study and articulates the coterminous nature of the research endeavour:

	Oct-07	Nov-07	Dec-07	Jan-08	Feb-08	Mar-08	Apr-08	May-08	Jun-08	Jul-08	Aug-08	Nov-08	Dec-08	Jan-09	Feb-09
Headteachers agreed to schools participation															
Study introduced to practitioners															
Practitioners select hard to reach															
Study introduced to participants, consent gained															
First interviews cohort two															
Transcription and coding															
First interviews cohort one															
Transcription and coding															
Further Analysis															
Preparation for second interviews															
Contacted participants															

	Feb-09	Mar-09	Apr-09	May-09	Jun-09	Jul-09	Aug-09	Nov-09	Dec-09	Jan-10	Feb-10	Mar-10	Apr-10	May-10	Jun-10	Jul-10
Second interviews																
Transcription and coding																
Further Analysis																
Preparation for third interviews																
Contacted participants																
Third interviews																
Transcription and coding																
Final Analysis																

## Appendix VII – Field notes made on interview schedule

C■■ was 16 Sept

Lives with Mum and Dad

Changed Junior School through bullying at St ■■■ to ■■■ the ■■■. But some positives as knows lot of people at ■■■ College.

Bullying racial abuse, both verbal and physical. Happened in Year 7 but under control now. Blames on other student's parents – picking it up from there.  
Now would sort them out, back then afraid of older brothers etc.

In Year 7 one time did punch someone who called him a name. Doesn't now.

As people have got older realise that who take mick out of are fine, eg Squares

Year 10 better, but some teachers has problem with.

Only doing Certificate in English at the moment, wants a C so would need to be moved into GCSE group – blames class there for lack of progression.  
Frustrated as teacher spends time dealing with disruptive kids that don't want to be there.

First choice join army, second cookery. Thinks depends on School report and GCSE grades.  
Specifically a cook in the paratroopers.

Work as chef and continue cadets til 18 and than join army

Would consider sixth form if gets C grades

Wants to do some cadet courses. Like fast track army officer and entry test for special units like paratroopers.

Got many army cadet certificates and other out of school activities.

Finds writing difficult. Gets tired of writing through the day.

Done lots of out of school activities. Mainly cadets. Stopped swimming and Taekwondo, also rows for Reds.

Dislikes Media, too much writing coursework, told little of it.  
Doing well in cooking.

Most important thing?

Same at home?

Parents together is that advantage compared to majority?

How feel about no brothers and sisters?

What things would go to parents for support?

Year 11?

School? ■■■ College?

Changes over years?

Still problems with some teachers?

Still whether teachers make lessons fun.

How would teacher describe you?

Excited  
Fw in army. Process  
Thinking.  
Adverts

Cup.

P. company.

Paratroopers?

2010.

20 weeks.

Harrogate.

1

S Ds needed

As confident  
as says?

Grandpa's Grandad.

• Knuckling down of R■■  
knuckling down

## Appendix VIII – Profiles of key participants

14 Young people who were interviewed three times:

Pseudonym: James

Interviewed three times, Year 11-13

Home<sup>1</sup>: Lived with mother, two younger sisters, an older sister and an older brother. Mother had sporadic cleaning jobs.

Education and transition: Attended a small 11-16 school. Was excluded from the school before his final GCSE exam. Attended FE college in North Countyshire taking a Mechanics course over two years. Planned to start working with his brother in Year 14.

James had a volatile relationship with his father while he was living at home. He felt he had a bad reputation at school, where one ought to be able to have fun as well as do work. He spoke of opening his own garage both locally and in America, however, by his final interview he felt he must work the following year in order to be able to afford to run his car and pay rent at home.

Pseudonym: Zara

Interviewed three times, Year 11-13

Home: Lived with mother, older brother and sister. Soon after leaving school she moved in with her boyfriend after an argument with her mother. They planned to marry soon after her final interview. Mum worked in care home.

Education and transition: Attended the same small 11-16 school as James. Only took four GCSE exams having withdrawn from the remainder. Began working in a retail store (JWT) in Year 12. In Year 13 was working in a care home and had plans to remain in that type of work.

Zara showed a transformation between her school based interview and two post-16. At school she was under the impression she was on the verge of permanent exclusion and did not like school. She had been removed from many of her GCSE lessons. Beyond school she was living with her boyfriend in a flat needing to work in order to pay bills, not having the freedom she had envisaged.

Pseudonym: Jasmin

Interviewed three times, Year 11-13

Home: Lived with mother and stepfather having moved to North Countyshire from the outskirts of London in Year 9. Both mum and stepdad worked in office jobs.

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<sup>1</sup> At time of first interview.

Education and transition: Attended a large 11-18 school. Had planned to study Beauty Therapy at college, but continued with part-time work at pubs post-16, taking NVQs alongside the work. In Year 13 she had commenced college studying Travel and Tourism, but suspended her studies for a year due to pregnancy and giving birth.

Jasmin spoke of the differences between where she used to live and the town in North Countyshire and settling in in Year 9. She changed her mind about her future plans several times. Pregnancy was said to be an accident. Prior to this she had moved out of home into her own flat after an argument with her Mother. She intended to return to college in Year 14.

Pseudonym: Kurt

Interviewed three times, Year 11-13

Home: Lived with father and older brother. Saw Mum and Stepdad regularly. Dad works in manufacturing.

Education and transition: Attended the same 11-18 school as Jasmin. Low attendance during GCSE years due to bullying about sexuality. Took a hairdressing course at college planning to progress onto the Level 3 work based course in Year 14.

Despite missing much of Year 11, Kurt gained 5 C grades at GCSEs. His story was dominated by 'coming out' in Year 11 and experiences of bullying and truancy associated with this. Feeling he had a natural flair for hairdressing, he enjoyed his college course, choosing the college based course over an apprenticeship. At the end of Year 13 he had found a paid placement to use for the course the following year.

Pseudonym: Bethany

Interviewed three times, Year 11-13

Home: Lived with mother, father and older sister. Dad cares for her Mum who has MS.

Education and transition: Attended a larger 11-16 school. After taking an increased flexibility Hairdressing course at the local college one day a week in the final two years of school, secured a hairdressing apprenticeship. She changed her placement in Year 13, quitting the first one.

Transition involved change from school and lack of responsibility to apprenticeship which was working environment. Preferred the earning and learning to school. Preferred the second apprenticeship provider as better relationship with manager there. Demonstrates that young people can find apprenticeships and can find a new placement after quitting first.

Pseudonym: Kirsty

Interviewed three times, Year 11-13

Home: Lived with mother, father and older brother. Two older sisters had moved out. Very rare amongst all participants that lives with both parents Mum unemployed, Dad builder.

Education and transition: Attended large 11-16 school in large town. Felt she had outgrown school. With aspiration of police work in mind took Level 2 Uniformed Services course in Year 12. In Year 13 has commenced a Health and Social Care course and begun working at a Care Home.

Kirsty took her transition one step at a time. Feeling uncertain about what she wanted to do after school, although was looking forward to leaving. Was keen on police work once 21, although less certain in Year 13. After Year 12 made decision about next course very late. Step by step transition.

Pseudonym: Ricky

Interviewed three times, Year 11-13

Home: Lived with Mother. Older brother at University. Mum worked in retail. No contact with Father.

Education and transition: Attended the same 11-16 school as Kirsty. Regretted poor behaviour in lower school and spoke of buckling down in Year 11, although felt in hindsight this was too late. Started mechanics course in Year 12 but quickly transferred to Business Studies.

Ricky spoke at length in his first interview about a love of cars and previous work experience at BMW. But soon decided that the mechanics course at college was not suited to him. He transferred to Business Studies, but left college in Year 13 after breaking his leg and feeling he had missed too much to catch up. He worked part time at a supermarket in Year 12 and 13.

Pseudonym: Jonathan

Interviewed three times, Year 11-13

Home: Lived with Auntie and Uncle, older brother and cousins. Uncle operated fork lift trucks, Auntie a housewife.

Education and transition: Attended a smaller 11-16 school having moved from the Midlands in Year 8. Took construction course at college in Year 12 and beginning of Year 13, then withdrew and started working with girlfriend's father at cheese making factory.

Jonathan had a challenging upbringing, his mother died while giving birth and his father was in prison. His Nan brought him up from birth to 13 years of age before he moved to his Auntie and Uncles. Adjusting to the difference from the Midlands and a very large school was found difficult. Experience with drugs and was charged and had a court hearing at the end of Year 12 for burglaries and arson.

Pseudonym: Dominic

Interviewed three times, Year 11-13

Home: Lived with Mother and her boyfriend. Three sisters and a younger brother. Some contact with Dad who was a self-employed painter and decorator.

Education and transition: Attended the same 11-16 school as Ricky until Year 9 when permanently excluded. Attended the Key Stage 4 PRU in final two years of compulsory schooling. NEET for majority of time post-16.

Dominic had experiences with youth offending and drug use which differed from many other participants, as well as his permanent exclusion from secondary school. He worked for six months in a pub kitchen a job found through his youth offending programme. But eventually he quit the job. He was contemplating college for Year 14.

Pseudonym: Kevin

Interviewed three times, Year 10-12

Home: Lived with father who was unemployed, stepmother and stepbrother.

Education and transition: Attended the same 11-16 school as Bethany. Did not start until Year 8 as was permanently excluded from Primary School and attended a PRU. Behavioural problems during secondary school. Took increased flexibility Mechanics course at local college during Year 10 and Year 11 and studied mechanics at college in Year 12.

Like Ricky, Kevin spoke about wanting to work with cars, but felt that the college course did not offer any more than the course he had previously taken. Not enjoying it he planned to study something else in Year 12, not wishing to commit to a decision until necessary. He had moved out of home in Year 12 after an argument with his father. He was living in a bedsit at the time of his final interview.

Pseudonym: Jennifer

Interviewed three times, Year 10-12

Home: Lived with mother and younger brother. Mother unemployed, older sister had moved out.

Education and transition: Attended one 11-16 school until Year 10 when moved house and school to South Maverick. Was seeking work in Year 12 after withdrawing from Business Studies course at the FE college attended by many other young people.

Jennifer spent some of Year 9 living in a refuge with her mother and brother after it became unsafe for them to live with her stepdad. This had an impact on her life as did settling into a new town and school. She truanted often during her last two years of school, but also had health issues. She withdrew from college after not enjoying the course and the other students. She worked briefly at a restaurant and for Avon and was seeking work when interviewed in Year 12. She intended returning to a smaller college campus in Year 13.

Pseudonym: Imogen

Interviewed three times, Year 10-12

Home: Lived with mother, stepfather, older brother and sister. Her mum and stepdad ran a business from home.

Education and transition: Attended the same 11-16 school as Kevin. Did not enjoy school. Once at college found out that she was dyslexic. Studied Beauty Therapy at college.

Imogen spoke about several issues outside of school, including changes in peer groups and the negative influence of some peers while at school. She worked part-time at a supermarket alongside college. She was living with her Dad when interviewed in Year 12, having had an argument with her Mum, although this was expected to be temporary. She planned to travel after completing her studies.

Pseudonym: Chloe

Interviewed three times, Year 10-12

Home: Lived with Mum, her boyfriend, older brother and younger sister and brother. All siblings are half siblings. Mum unemployed, her boyfriend worked as scaffolder.

Education and transition: Attended a large 11-18 school. Often truanted and was at risk of permanent exclusion but was only one of young people to take up A Levels, which she did at the school's sixth form.

Chloe like many other participants spoke of always being with friends in Year 10, this did not stop in Year 11 but was seen as less appealing. Drinking was a significant part of her life, often drinking daily. Her truanting tended to be

particular lessons. Although taking A Levels, she decided late – on GCSE results day and was not keen on University.

Pseudonym: Jacob

Interviewed three times, Year 10-12

Home: Lived with mother who was unemployed, an older brother and sister and a younger brother and sister.

Education and transition: Attended the same 11-18 school as Jasmin and Kurt. Attended few of GCSE exams and does not know results. Decided against mechanics course at college and was looking for work in Year 12 when interviewed for the final time. Had been sporadically attending activity agreement with Connexions.

Many of Jacob's friends had been permanently excluded from his school. He was often in trouble but did not want to be excluded. Although he was accepted onto a mechanics course at the FE college he intended trying to find a job after school ended. He did not find a job or attend college. Although like others he regretted this decision in hindsight.

Other participants not interviewed three times whose transcripts were used within the thesis:

Pseudonym: Harriet. Interviewed twice Year 11 and Year 12.

Pseudonym: Sasha. Interviewed once Year 11.

Pseudonym: Adam. Interviewed once Year 10.

## Appendix IX – Example of extract of coded interview transcript

	Darren: Were you trying to find a job that would have paid a bit?
No paid jobs for under 18s Take opportunity	Kirsty: Like I was saying I did go in town. Just everywhere's busy and you have to be 18. and then I went in there, not knowing it was voluntary at the time and it was. And they were really friendly and they offered me a place straight away. And I thought, I went out the door and I thought oh I'll take it, so I went back in and took it. Yeah.
	Darren: Is it just so you have a job on your CV, or are there any other good bits or useful bits of it?
Training at work Communication skills	Kirsty: They're going to teach me how to use a till, which is one advantage. Obviously communicating with others. Umm which is all useful if you want to be in the police. And for my CV as well.
	Darren: How come you've stuck with this police plan, cos when we talked it [plan] was only two weeks old.
	Kirsty: Umm
	Darren: And there had been lots of changes of other things you wanted to do.
Pressure to decide future Vetinary too hard Advice on career Course useful for career Communication important	Kirsty: I dunno really, everyone was telling me what to do and that and everyone was saying. What I wanted to do was vet originally, but it was far too hard, everyone was saying why don't you go in the police, it's really a good job, it's good money which was true. Now with this course at College, this one's a year. Public Services which is really useful cos it is more about how you communicate and that and obviously you are going to need that to set an example to the community in the police. So this is what I did this year. Unlike others perhaps did think of something ambitious, but recognised excluded from it, because too hard.
	Darren: is it still the same plan for next year, carry on]
Not progress course Stop if too hard Give up too hard	Kirsty: [Probably not. To be honest I don't know yet what I'm doing the second year, I've not gone that far. <b>I doubt I'll be doing the second year as its really really hard.</b> That's if I'm honest. I know I shouldn't give up, but its really really hard so I don't know.
	Darren: Is the one [First Diploma] at the moment hard?
	Kirsty: At times yeah.
	Darren: Are you still sure about police work if you don't carry on?
Not give up on career	Kirsty: I'm not going to give up now I've started. There's nothing else I want to do anyway so

	Will give up course, but not on career
	Darren: Yep
	Kirsty: I'm just going to carry on.
	Darren: Do teachers on the course say anything, if they know you want to go into that kind of work?
	Kirsty: What do you mean say anything?
	Darren: Have they said what you might need to do or what might be best to get into that kind of work?
Teachers college nice	Kirsty: umm not really. no they haven't not really no. the teachers are actually really nice. You can have like a joke with them. They're not stuck up or anything.
	Darren: What is it about police work, that means it is the one thing that you would like to do?
Focus on career choice	Kirsty: What in the police? (1) Either a parole officer or a traffic, a traffic cop.
	Darren: Is there anything about those two bits that appeal?
	Kirsty: Parole officer, probably cos its just working with people and that. I don't know I'm just picky to that I like that. You know I just like that job.
	Darren: How about police work in general because last time we spoke it was quite new. Were there any reasons why it still appeals?
Advice on career Choosing career = taking a chance Risk in choosing	Kirsty: What why I wanted to be in the police? It's probably at first my sister mentioned it and I didn't listen, then my brother did and I had a think because two people said it and I thought cos there's nothing else I wanted to do, apart from vets but that was out anyway. And I thought, oh I'll just take a chance and do this.
	Risk when decide career.
	Darren: do you have any contact with the police yourself, to get an idea what it would be like?
Will gain work experience	Kirsty: No, in the future not now I am going to do some voluntary work. I've got plenty of time for that, anyway yet.
	Darren: Lots of people I speak to tell me about the police, maybe running into them on a Friday or Saturday night. It sounds like you might have a better opinion of the police than most of them do (.). Do you ever come into contact with them out and about.
Picture self in career	Kirsty: Not really, funnily enough I did see some this morning. I just walked past and thought that could be me one day, it could be.

	Darren: That's different to what other people might think
People stereotype police	Kirsty: That's just stereotyping isn't it.
	Darren: Has the course helped you decide that it is still what you want to do?
Course has not changed future plan	Kirsty: Yeah, its not changed my opinion or anything, so yeah
	Darren: And what about the course itself, what are like the good bits?
Prefer not writing Teachers at College nice	Kirsty: Umm, assignments, it's not all written. Some of its presentations and that. Some of its like leaflets. They're [teachers] really nice.
	Darren: You didn't have a favourite lesson at school, do you have a favourite bit of the course here?
Something will always be boring.	Kirsty: Umm (2) my worst bit is like land and navigation. Like maps, compasses and boring crap. But there's always going to be some boring bits, you cant help that. Different to school, accept that don't like things now
	Darren: How do you deal with them here. Is it different to how you would of done at school?
Choose College so more engaged Forced to go to school Qualification important now Changed opinion of sport	Kirsty: It's different here, because <b>you choose to go to College. School you don't [choose] you have to go.</b> So I look at it as if, I want a certificate at the end of it so I've got to put up with the bad bits, you know put up with what I don't want to do. and we do lots of Sport, which I used to hate sport in school, but I don't mind it now. Like on Thursday morning, we go out on the hard court and play some games. Tomorrow, we'll go in the gym. We do other stuff in the week. Forced to go to school so resent boring bits. Choose college so have to put up with.
	Darren: How come Sport up here is better than school?
	Kirsty: I don't know.
	Darren: How come you didn't enjoy it at school?
More fun at College	Kirsty: There it was like sport, here you can just play games, you don't look at it as sport, you know what I mean.
	Darren: You mentioned about keeping fit last time, as something that might be quite good on the course
Not kept fit as said would Not keep word	Kirsty: Umm yeah I haven't really kept to that.
	Darren: Aha

	Kirsty: hhh
	Darren: You might have said to do with the police work
Want to continue at College Choose something to benefit career Stepping stone to career	Kirsty: Well I want to stay at College for three years, whatever I do and whatever I choose on the second year will be beneficial to what I want to do, whether its computer skills whatever.
	Will do subjects at College that help career, if not related
	Darren: Any ideas what it might be?
Want improve IT skills Boring put off Holiday important	Kirsty: I might do IT, I'm not sure. Cos quite a few people said it's absolutely boring, really boring. That puts me off. Like I'm not joining the police until I'm 21, cos I want to like go on holiday before and that. I'm going to try all that year to get set up, to go into the police. And obviously apply before
	Darren: Sure. Are there any girls doing the course?
Mainly male course	Kirsty: Yeah not many. There's myself, my friend N###, my friend S###, god don't even get me started on her and my other, S###. There was another girl called L### but she dropped out, we don't know why.
	Darren: What are the people like on the course?
	Kirsty: What all of them?
	Darren: Yeah, like the group?
Group at College good Some people mess around at College	Kirsty: Some really nice (.) they're all nice like, but some, there's two of them that prat around non-stop. Like ruin, when we're playing a game they ruin it like constantly. Like chucking equipment or whatever. (1) pretty nice yeah.
	Darren: Have you made any proper friends on the course
No close friends at College	Kirsty: I've made friends but just in general made friends.

## Appendix X – Example of analytical memo

Memo 30/07/2009

### Transformation

The young people experience change as they live out their lives between the ages of 14 and 18 (assume will see changes Y12-13, if amount of change within school between Y10-11 is typical). These changes range from the landmark transition out of compulsory schooling at 16 years of age, to personal changes that are often unpredictable like the formation and dissolution of intimate relationships (if see more dissolution next year will they obfuscate importance of relationships? Eg James).

While a gradual transition might be the case in terms of normative progression sense across many of the participants in terms of re-engagement with school in the final year and growth in their year beyond school, a transformation is apparent when young people start planning for and acting towards their future. These young people appear to change their attitudes and behaviour when they start to value their future lives and begin acting towards changing their future for the better. The following discussion details this unpredictable, yet common transformation and shows the sharp impact it has on the lives of the young people as opposed to other more gradual changes in response to experience.

Jasmin before didn't care about anything. Used to be on Streets in Year 11, now ashamed of that. Police not moving them on. before hated office work, now will do it as job wants to do. customer services course will help. Ready to move out now. Much better behaved and mature at work. Not going to rely on Stepdad for jobs now. Hardly drinks now.

James buckled down at school after decided mechanics over construction. Also appears to have transformed attitude when home had calmed down. His choice of NDC and breaking up with girlfriend seems pivotal to change. But then choosing a College is not choosing career, hence excluded at end. Attitude to College had dipped – different, is this because no fixed career plan. Although he does have America plan. Like others transformation happened because life improved. He does not have career plan as up in air, ergo no transformation can see transition and change. Attitude changed, no because slacked at College.

But other transformations:

'It's just finding a new group of friends, And seeing like a better side of life in general. Cos I'd never go back and hang around with those lot, I just think about it now, I was like such a mess. They all are now really. Glad I saw sense really.'

Kirsty has her career in mind but is putting off action for time being so no real transformation, need evidence of not really changed – College course not helped to decide, no real impact. Behaviour improved at college but says she hasn't changed. Same friends.

Real transformation predicted to come after College when moves towards police, all that year will get fitter. Regrets not trying on GCSEs – did not try as did not have plan.

Is thinking about future, eg IT next year, but just thinking about future does not lead to transformation

Kirsty: I'm still myself, I've not changed one bit.

I like to take things one step at a time. Cos one if you plan things, nine times out of ten they don't go to plan. Umm my second thing is I don't need to make my decision now so why bother

Experience to play a part, lack of agency?

Zara has a forced transformation because has own flat? Argue that she chose career, not in sense that chose occupation and determined path but because agreed to move in and at that point transformed as needed to be responsible.

So again lack of agency even though she talks about 'choice'?

Zara: Well I thought I'd have like (.) I'd get a job, i'll have money, I'll be able to do what I want and all this, but its not, you do get money but straight away it goes and I don't know what I thought. I thought it would be so much easier. [...] now I've got to worry about bills and cant really afford not to go to work. Whereas at school it did matter if you didn't turn up but (hhh) but it was a bit up to me.

## Appendix XI – Conventions from conversational analysis used in interview transcription

- (.) Just noticeable pause  
(.3) pause or silence measured in seconds.
- C:[it's been  
P:[Okay This is used to indicate the point at which speech overlaps.
- C: a while= No pause between speakers' lines  
P: =Yeah
- wor- A dash shows a sharp cut-off
- ### unintelligible or untranscribable utterance
- word Underlined sounds are louder, capitals louder still  
CAPITAL
- \*drugs\* words between asterix indicate softer voice or said in manner indicated by notes in double parentheses such as "((said in a softer, suspicious tone))"
- Oka::y the ":" indicates a lengthening of the preceding vowel sound
- Yesterday indicates stress on the italicized syllable
- e x a c t l y word said in a slower, emphatic fashion
- ↑word Onset of noticeable pitch rise or fall  
↓word
- HHH laughing or chuckling, each H represents one contraction of the diaphragm.
- wo(h)rd (h) is a try at showing that the word has "laughter" bubbling within it
- wo:rd Colons show that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound.
- ((sobbing)) Transcriber's go at representing something hard, or impossible, to write phonetically

## Appendix XI – Post-16 Destinations of those participants where known

	Cohort one		Cohort two		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	
FE College	6	3	3	2	14
School Sixth Form				2	2
Apprenticeship		1			1
Job with training		1			1
Job without training		1	1		2
NEET	1		2	1	4
Total	7	6	6	5	24

This table captures more than the destinations of the 18 young people interviewed post-16 as some young people were contacted regarding a post-16 interview which did not then occur.

### Year 13 changes for cohort 1

	Year 12		Year 13		Comment
	M	F	M	F	
FE College	6	3	2	2	None moved into as Jasmin NEET at time of interview
School Sixth Form					
Apprenticeship		1		2	Harriet moved from FE to Apprenticeship in Hairdressing
Job with training		1		1	Changed, Jasmin Y12, Zara Y13
Job without training		1	3		Zara moved into job with training, 3 males moved from FE to JWT
NEET	1		2	1	Dominic NEET at both interviews, although job with training between. Jasmin NEET Y13 re baby, Michael dropped out of college

As for previous research (e.g. Lawy et al., 2009) destinations were fluid, with much change seen between years.

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