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ABSTRACT

Current research into youth transitions in Australia documents an increasingly individualized process in which significant numbers of youths are deemed at risk of not making a successful transition from school to work. Many theorists are questioning the applicability of the linear model of transition to current conditions. Other theorists are questioning whether the model was ever applicable to all students (especially "nonmainstream" students). The literature also documents the perceived failure of policy in ensuring successful transitions through recognized "pathways" of vocational learning and experience. It may be argued that, by broadening their focus to include the informal vocational experiences young people initiate and the type of learning that occurs in such instances, educational researchers may provide useful insights into how young people experience the transition process and how they seek to position themselves in the youth labor market. Research on this area is being conducted as part of the Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training's national key center program supported by the Australian National Training Authority. It is hoped that this research will shed new light on the increasingly complex transition process experienced by noncollege-bound young people and help policymakers devise more effective policies to assist this transition. (Contains 22 references.) (MN)

Making pathways: young people and their informal vocational learning

Discussion paper

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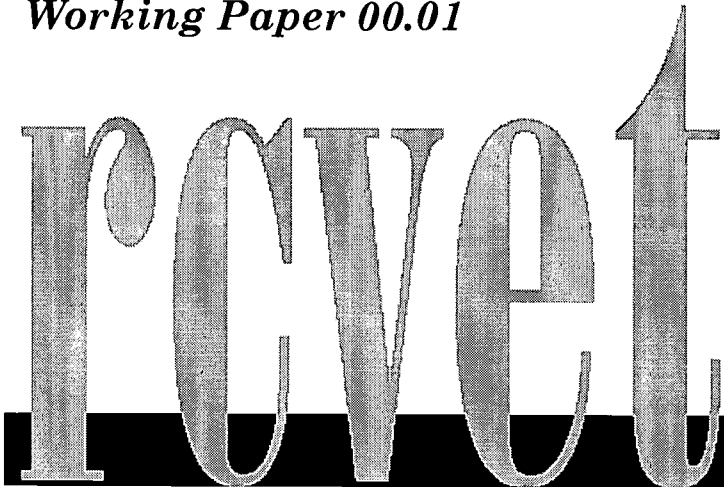
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Making pathways: young people and their informal vocational learning. A discussion paper

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Abstract

Current research into youth transitions in Australia documents an increasingly individualised process (McKenzie, 2000) in which a significant number of 15-19 year-olds are deemed to be "at risk" of not making a successful transition from school to full-time work (Curtain, 1999). In this picture, the linear model of transition is seen by many as no longer applicable to current conditions. Furthermore, a significant number of theorists question whether this model ever was applicable to all, citing the experiences of "non-mainstream" youth who were traditionally viewed as having "problematic" transitions (Dwyer, 1997; Chisholm, 1999).

The perceived failure of policy in assuring successful transitions through recognised 'pathways' of vocational learning and experience is documented in the current literature. Key theorists have pointed to the lack of quality outcomes for 15-19 year olds despite the policy rhetoric and public expenditure of the last ten years (Sweet, 2000). This sense of disquiet compounds to create one of the enduring themes in the school to work transition literature – the 'youth problem'.

However, it can be argued that a change of focus may usefully contribute to this discussion. That is, by looking outside the range of vocational learning opportunities available through current policy provision, new research may provide useful insights into how young people experience this transition process and how they seek to position themselves in the youth labour market. One way of examining this process is to look at the informal vocational experiences young people initiate and the type of learning that takes place in these instances. Further examination of pathways created by young people, as distinct from pathways followed, may shed light on the increasingly complex and risky process of moving between school and work for young people not bound for higher education. Examining the school to work transition process through concepts such as self-efficacy of youth rather than the failure of more formalised opportunities can add to the current discussion.

INTRODUCTION

In examining the movement of young people from school into the workforce and the variety of vocational learning that takes place along the way, powerful metaphors of transition, such as "pathways," have provided a framework for discussion and shaped policy formulation. Traditionally, the discussion focused on a linear notion of transition, based on dominant sociological concepts of the life course (Chisholm, 1999). In this conceptualisation of the learning process, school led to training or higher education which resulted in full-time employment. The opportunities for and outcomes of learning in this model were clear cut and generally discrete.

However, this linear transition model is now seen by many as no longer applicable to current conditions. Furthermore, a significant number of theorists question whether it ever

was applicable to all, citing the experiences of "non-mainstream" youth (the working class, females and minority group youth) to highlight the limitations of the model. In the last 20 years, the pathways from school to full-time employment, still considered as one of the key markers of adult status in both symbolic and material terms (Blakers, 1990), have become more complex due to changing global economic conditions. The impact of these structural changes on the transition of youth into the labour market have therefore, continued as a major focus in public discourse about youths (Krahn and Lowe, 1999). Subsequent policy responses in Australia have focused on interventions which have increasingly focused on the employability of young people (White, 1990). This trend has resulted in the current emphasis on youth training initiatives (rather than job creation) and a diversity of sites of vocational learning for young people.

Currently, questions are being asked about the ways these discussions shape thinking about youth transition and vocational learning and to what extent policy makers have been able to successfully respond to these changing circumstances. The legitimacy of questioning policy based on a concept of the linearity of such transitions is well established through current Australian research (Dwyer, 1997) which shows that young people increasingly define their own experience and understandings of 'transition' without reference to defined pathways and structured guidelines. Sweet's (1998) contention that young Australians have not markedly benefited from the money spent on policy developments in the last ten years is an indictment on a system designed to make 'pathways' to employment and further education and training more readily available to all. The individualisation of the process (as distinct from the institutionalisation of the process) is also well documented through recent analysis of the LSAY data (McKenzie, 2000). Furthermore, this current theme coincides with the international theoretical debate about the significance of traditional structures in shaping the transition process in late modernity (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) and has led to a focus on concepts such as 'individualisation' and 'risk' when examining youth transitions. Both of these concepts can be seen to have important implications for the conceptualisation of the transition of young people from school to work and the possible vocational learning experiences they engage in as part of this process.

Research on this question is being conducted as part of the RCVET's national key centre program supported by the Australian National Training Authority (RP101). It takes its focus from these current debates, and tries to examine new ways of looking at youth transitions by considering not only the influence of traditional structures but also the notion of the individualisation of transition behaviours. There has been a rigorous examination of the notion of transition and pathways in the academic literature, and analysis of evidence that suggests that youth transition policy interventions are out of step with the current needs of young people (Sweet, 1998). Yet there has been little research into what young people actually do for themselves to make themselves ready for entry into the full-time labour market and how these actions might be viewed in relation to the changing conditions in the labour market. There is a paucity of data in Australia on the learning that takes place when young people engage with the world of work and initiate their own informal work-based learning.

This research will contribute to the discussion by looking at the learning that takes place in the self-initiated, informal work experience of young people who may be representative of the trend of 'individualisation' currently highlighted by the scholarly literature. Furthermore, narrative data collected from young people may be able to shed light on the

question of the extent they are aware of 'pathways' (in the sense of pre-existing, mapped trajectories to their employment goals) or whether they see themselves as individually responsible for charting their own courses through this evidently complicated transition process. As Chisholm (1999) suggests –

Perhaps it would now be sensible – and possibly even more cost-effective – to look at what young people actually do; discover thereby what kinds of information, advice, and support they would find most useful; and then design and provide targeted services on that basis. This is, after all, one way of ensuring that institutions keep up with individuals (p.317).

CONSTRUCTIONS OF 'YOUTH' IN TRANSITION POLICY

There are a number of important and recurrent themes in the youth transition literature. By far the most common theme is what might be labelled as the 'youth transition problem'. This aspect of the literature takes as its central precept the fact that since the late 1970s and early 1980s, youth transition to adult roles has become a more complex and risky process due to the collapse of the youth labour market and the subsequent marginalisation of youth from active citizenship due to unemployment. Central to this view is a notion of a normative transition process which is now no longer accessible to mainstream youth who have otherwise enjoyed a supposedly unproblematic transition. As Theissen and Looker (1999) point out, this concept of a normative transition process draws upon the life-course literature which proposes a series of 'markers' such as finding a full-time job, getting married and having children which define entry into adult life. As Dwyer (1997) points out, the assumption in this model is –

...that there is a natural process of development for young people leading from full-time schooling and then on into full-time work as the prelude to the achievement of responsible status of adulthood, citizenship and the parenting of the next generation (p.17).

Dwyer goes on to make direct links between this model of the life-course and policy decision-making in Australia. He cites the Working Nation policy as such an example, since it -

...defined the young in terms of studenthood and saw the teenage years as a "period in which to invest in education and training" as the necessary prerequisite to "help young people to enter the workforce" (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994:90) (p.17).

More recently, however, there has been a rigorous and critical questioning of the adequacy of this model to describe and/or predict youth transitions to adulthood. According to this argument, the social and institutional structures – family, education, industry and the state – which formed the basis of any legitimisation that this model claimed, can no longer be relied upon to deliver the expected outcomes. Other theorists argue that not only is the world not "like that" now, in fact for many young people, there never was a linear, unproblematic transition from school to work.

As far back as 1954, in the halcyon days of full employment, the rate of unemployment for teenagers (15-19) was 1.7 times higher than the rate for adults. Labour markets tend to discriminate against those with few skills, limited or no training and an unproven work ethic" (Blakers, 1990 p.7-8).

In an insightful overview of the youth transition literature, Chisholm (1999) describes three 'waves' of interest and discussion in the transition debate. According to Chisholm, youth transition was first focused on as problematic as a response to youth unemployment from the end of the 1970s.

Empirical research in north-western Europe studied 'blocked' and 'broken' transitions to adulthood, but with linear and sequential life-course patterns as the normative conceptual baseline. Where young people could not find stable employment...their access to full economic and social independence was constrained, with knock-on effects in other areas of their lives..." (p.305).

It could be argued that this wave of concern is still dominating the current discussion on youth in transition in Australia since it is preoccupied with the importance of full-time employment in the transition process. For example, Sweet (1998) although admitting that the problems faced by youth in Australia are broader than the measures that unemployment statistics describe, a "successful move for young people from full-time education to full-time work is a crucial step in their efforts to become independent adults" (p.2). Similarly, Curtain (1999) proposes a series of three performance indicators to measure the success or otherwise of youth transitions, two of which are focused on full-time employment rates.

Chisholm's (1999) second reported wave of problematising youth transitions was concerned with the adequacy of the life course theorisation to describe the experiences of all youth. According to Chisholm (1999) –

There had always been problems with this kind of conceptual framework. There were obviously individuals and groups whose lives did not match the normative expectations that had been carried over, unquestioned into sociological discourse of the life course. Until the 1980s, these "atypical" patterns were effectively treated as deviant or deficient...Minority-group and lower-class men, together with almost all women, were simply "not up to standard."

... It was not until young men generally began to have serious problems in meeting the tasks and milestones of youth transitions between education and employment that the mainstream youth studies community (as well as government policy making) started to raise more fundamental questions about the social construction of youth transitions altogether, however... It is arguable, however, that major policy measures with significant funding to respond to transition difficulties gained momentum only once it became clear that many "ordinary kids" who were neither unqualified nor necessarily from lower-working-class backgrounds were affected (p.305-306).

Finally, Chisholm identifies a third wave of questioning traditional notions of normative transition from a perspective that asks questions about the nature of transitions in late modernity – a time of declining influence of traditional life shaping structures and impact of globalised economies (Beck et al 1994 cited in Chisholm, 1999). This third wave of questioning frames the most current thinking in this area and foregrounds the key concepts of 'individualisation' and 'risk' which will be explored later in this paper and which may be productive for the framing this current research project.

THE PATHWAYS METAPHOR – A LIMITED INTERPRETATION?

Another important theme in the transition literature is the attempt to capture or describe the transition process in terms of metaphors. In particular, the 'pathways' metaphor has been a powerful image in Australian education and training discussions since the release of the

Finn Report in 1991 (Wyn and White, 1997; McKenzie, 2000). McKenzie (2000) notes that the report —

... argued that the concept provided a useful mental image to explain the various combinations of education, training and employment activities which individuals may undertake over time to reach a destination such as a desired qualification or type of employment (p.2).

This image has served to shape debate and policy formulation in a number of ways. As McKenzie points out, this image portrayed a "sense of order and structure" (McKenzie, 2000 p.1) in a world of youth transition that was by all accounts becoming increasingly complex and fractured for many young people. In an analysis of the image, Wyn and White (1997) focus on the implications of the notion of pathways in terms of seeing each young person as the individual cause of their own problematic transitions.

This metaphorical use of the idea of transitions positions young people as individual viewers of the landscape on which the pathways are visible and accessible. Young people make their individual choices (after reading the relevant "maps" or talking to travellers who have gone there before) and take their 'paths' towards their destinations. The paths are assumed to be there, so if some young people do not make it to the destination, the fault lies with them. In this way, the metaphor of transition effectively individualises the process of growing up, and its outcomes (p.99).

This notion of the individualisation of the pathways process has been verified in recent discussion on the variety of 'paths' young people appear to be taking. In a review of data collected in the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) program, where a sample of 1229 participants who did not obtain tertiary qualifications within a seven year post-school period engaged in 500 different patterns of activity, McKenzie (2000) commented that "pathways through education and into work in Australia can be characterised more as individually constructed than as institutionally based " (p.4). McKenzie goes on to note that —

The fact that labour markets in loosely-coupled systems such as Australia are relatively open and less dependent on occupationally-linked qualifications means that young people are able to try a variety of jobs as part of the career maturation process. Because much of the employment of young people is part-time and casual in nature (including many of the jobs held by students), the early work experiences of young Australians are often episodic and fragmented (p.5).

Traditionally, such experiences have been portrayed as less than ideal, as having direct and negative consequences for young people attempting to make the transition to full-time work. However, in a recent comparison with the more structured transition system in Germany (generally regarded in the internationally comparative literature as being a 'safer' system for transitional youth), Australian young people, by the time they reach the 20-24 years age band have comparable employment rate outcomes (Sweet, 2000). It would seem that the transition problems of the 15-19 year old age band decrease (or even disappear in comparative terms) as the cohort gets older.

How can this be explained? *Could it be that episodic and fragmented work experiences have some vocationally educative value for the young people involved? And if so, what types of learning take place in this process?* Current research in the Australian context does not appear to address such questions.

It would seem, moreover, that the pathways metaphor has a particular set of values underpinning its use in the Australian context. In McKenzie's analysis, it is clear that certain identified pathways are more valued than others. Pathways which lead to episodic or fragmented trajectories are judged as being unsuccessful and yet, Sweet's interpretation of the comparative statistics would suggest that by the time young people reach their early twenties, these individualised pathways (both "successful" and "unsuccessful" types) have lead effectively to the goal of employment rates comparative with other transition models lauded for their success. Perhaps the pathways metaphor might be better utilised if the concept of pathways forged in non-mainstream conditions are valued or at least examined for their educative value, as well as pathways followed in the more traditionally valued way.

POLICY – INTERVENTION AND IMPACT

In an historical overview of the formulation of youth policy in Australia since World War II, Irving, Maunders and Sherington (1995) pinpoint a number of key developments which have served to shape current approaches to policy concerning youth transition from school to work. They point out that it was during the early to mid 1980s that "youth emerged as a significant policy area" (p.247), largely due to the new Labor government's realisation that "immediate full employment of the young would be impossible to achieve" (p.248). The growing realisation that youth unemployment was now a "major structural dilemma, and a growing and intractable problem across the Western world" (p.244) saw the focus of youth policy change in important ways.

Irving, Maunders and Sherington (1995 p.248) suggest that from the time it came to office, the federal ALP's youth policy was essentially framed around education and training, rather than job creation. As a number of youth policy commentators have noted, this shift in policy focus has had a number of implications for the way youth have been constructed by policy.

If policy formulation discursively constitutes the subject for whom the policy is designed (Irving, Maunders and Sherington, 1995 citing Yeatman), this shift to viewing youth as citizens whose deficits can be targeted through policy intervention is significant. In this case, the deficit lies in their employability (White, 1990). Thus the focus has been effectively shifted from the changing global economic structures which created large-scale youth unemployment in Western industrialised nations to the individual, who if in possession of the right skills' (gained through education and training programs), would be able to overcome the obstacles faced in the transition from school to work. In this policy construction, youth becomes "the problem" rather than global economic trends.

The outcome of this shift has seen a range of changes made to the post-compulsory curriculum with, broadly speaking, an emphasis on increased exposure for young people to vocational education and training. Indeed, as Sweet (1998) notes, 'Increasing young people's participation in vocational education and training has been one of the central priorities of government during the 1990s' (p.8).

However, recent appraisals concerning the impact of such policy initiatives are not positive in their findings. McKenzie (2000), for example recently stated that -

Despite the substantial reforms during the 1990s that drew in large measure on the Finn Committee's pathways imagery, analyses and recommendations, it is perhaps fair to say that a decade later there is still considerable disquiet in Australia about the nature and functioning of the pathways open to young people (p.2).

Schools remain a focus for initial intervention, especially in terms of attempts to curb early school leaving for those young people for whom the traditional curriculum holds little interest or perceived relevance. Yet, once again, the efficacy of such measures has come under widespread doubt -

Ainley observes that there has been a rapid growth in school-industry programs during the 1990s, in which students spend part of their time engaged in structured learning in workplaces. But he also points out that in many instances the extent of contact with the workplace is quite limited. The most rapid growth occurred in programs that offer students only brief periods of time out of the school and in the workplace. Only 2% of senior students are found in programs requiring 20 or more days of workplace learning (Sweet, 2000 p.7).

... The dominant impression from these figures is of a school system that has responded little to the increasing diversity of student interests and talents that has confronted it following the marked increases in retention rates observed during the 1980s (Sweet, 2000 p.7).

In a similar vein, Sweet's analysis of the youth employment, education and training statistics paints a pessimistic picture -

In summary, the outcomes for the vocational education and training sector are: no growth in overall participation; declining apprenticeship numbers; traineeships being increasingly captured by adults; and a decline in the provision of extended and broadbased courses. This record cannot be said to be positive for youth, and stands in marked contrast both to the rhetoric of government policy during the 1990s and to public expenditure priorities (p.10).

There are a number of important policy problems and implications arising from this overview of school to work transition. The first is the widespread sense among prominent commentators that policy has not been successful in responding to the demands of the current situation, especially with regard to the 15-19 years cohort. These indictments on the *inability of policy to positively impact upon the outcomes for young people in transition* can perhaps be explained by considering the difficulty of policy planning in periods of rapid change. Chisholm's (1999) analysis offers an explanation which can be seen to be useful in that it forces the debate to consider the role of research in terms of the context in which policy decisions are being made -

Most education-to-employment transitions research is necessarily empirically retrospective (using data referring to the past, albeit often recent), even when it is explicitly future oriented (i.e., interested in forecasting future trends). The perils of social trend forecasting are legion and its frequent inaccuracies are well known; it remains, however, an indispensable element of social theory and policy. The task of judging the extent to which the future can and will replicate the past or can be extrapolated from existing data is the crux of futures analysis. This can be hazardous, especially in periods of very rapid change (such as the present) and in particular when the pace and nature of change suggest that our societies and economies are undergoing a genuinely qualitative change (for example, the transition to postindustrial economies or knowledge societies)." (Chisolm, 1999 p.299).

Furthermore, the perceived failure of policy may also be due to a lack of current research in Australia which adequately theorises the nature of these changes in the local context.

Questions could be asked about the extent to which the qualitative societal changes that Chisholm alludes to are informing the questions that are being asked in current research.

WHAT CAN YOUNG PEOPLE LEARN AT WORK?

Turning from this overview of the current thinking about the nature of transition for young people into employment or further education and training, it is necessary now to focus on the question of what new research might contribute from a perspective that places *young people and their agency* at the centre of the discussion.

Traditionally, the way young people have sought to better position themselves in the labour market has been through engaging in part-time paid work while at school. Drawing on the LSAY data, Robinson (1999) found that in 1992, between one quarter and one third of 17 year-old school students were employed part-time. Tracking this cohort two years later revealed that at 19 years of age, participants who had worked part-time during school were less likely to be unemployed. In fact, 'Compared with non-workers in Year 11, students who worked longer hours (more than 10 per week) were advantaged more than those who worked fewer hours, although both groups were significantly less likely than non-workers to be unemployed at age 19' (Robinson, 1999 p.vi).

An important point to consider here is the nature of the learning experiences young people are exposed to in these early vocational experiences. It is well established that adolescents have 'a narrow array of work opportunities, concentrated in the retail and service sectors' (Mortimer and Pimentel, 1996 p.2) where training time is minimised (Hamilton and Hamilton, 1997). These informal vocational experiences provide little in the way of formalised training and provide recognition of only a limited array of vocational skills. However, it is clear from Robinson's (1999) findings above concerning the positive link between part-time work and future employment prospects, that young people are gaining important knowledge from these early experiences which on the surface appear to offer very little in terms of the training opportunities. The current research project therefore asks what do young people gain from such informal vocational learning experiences.

Mortimer and Pimentel (1996) note the importance of part-time work during adolescence for forming vocational interests, adult identity and a sense of the rewards (intrinsic and extrinsic) that work can offer. Hamilton and Hamilton (1997) acknowledge both the possibilities and limitations of part-time employment and suggest that -

...classic youth jobs such as working in fast-food restaurants and grocery stores can teach some important lessons, especially in the realm of personal and social competence ...; punctuality, reliability, responsiveness to supervision, and customer relations. One young person said that working in a fast food restaurant taught her "how to be nice to people I don't like." The principal limitation of youth jobs as learning opportunities is that they are organised to minimise the need for technical competence. Turnover in some establishments employing large numbers of teenagers exceeds 100% per year, meaning that training time must be minimised and jobs kept as simple as possible (p.3).

McIntyre, Freeland, Melville and Schwenke (1998) in a study of early school leavers on the NSW Central Coast add significantly to this discussion. They were able to identify groups of young people who despite being early school leavers, could not be categorised as being "at risk" of failing to make a successful transition to full-time employment. In

drawing upon typologies proposed by Dwyer (1996, 1997), McIntyre et al described 'positive leavers' who had either a vocational motive (ie., a specific career goal) or occupational motive (ie the goal to win any job) for their leaving, revealing a range of characteristics which seemed to stand them in good stead in the competitive youth labour market. Firstly, for both groups, part-time work, casual work and relevant work experience were important in the development of their ability to make a successful transition. For those with a clear vocational focus, part-time work could sometimes be found in the career goal area --

Leanne began working voluntarily in a hairdressing salon in order to learn the beauty business and win an apprenticeship. Steve was helped by his careers advisor to get a part-time job as a meat packer after work experience, and then worked hard to get the job upgraded, was overlooked for an apprenticeship and was only later successful (McIntyre et al, 1999 p.58-59).

Other positive leavers with an occupational focus (that is, they were focused on gaining employment rather than a specific career) showed themselves to be highly focused on winning work.

They realise how competitive the youth labour market is and already have many of the qualities which employers want in young people. They know what qualities will give them the edge (McIntyre et al, 1999 p.68).

These young people appear to be successfully positioning themselves in such a way as to achieve the knowledge and skills necessary to win work. For some of them, this knowledge is added to by formalised vocational training, however for most, this is not initially the case. Many of the participants categorised as positive early leavers, sought direct experience of the workplace before entering into more formalised training arrangements and others tended to use short courses to enhance their employability while seeing on-the-job experience as crucial to future opportunities. These findings suggest that further questions might usefully be asked about the experiences of these young people in transition. This current project is well positioned to examine exactly what these successful young people are learning in these informal vocational experiences and how they are learning in these sites.

It could be argued that marginalised youth, if they are to make a successful transition to full-time employment have always had to find alternatives because recognised transition arrangements never did work for them. They have always relied on informal networks, learning quickly and learning on-the-job and certainly not always, or in the first instance, accessing vocational education and recognised qualifications. Hence, it is the biographies of young people that might provide insights into the way they explore options and make 'pathways'.

Such research might give insights into productive ways of looking at work and knowledge in these new less certain times. It may become increasingly relevant for policy to consider how youth are negotiating the transition from school to work, given the failure of existing transition systems to guarantee successful outcomes for more mainstream youth. In an interesting reversal, studying the traditional techniques of the marginalised may produce knowledge which can aid the increasingly embattled "mainstream," especially if it is true, as Chisholm (1999) contends, that -

...such systems can no longer effectively guide, control, or predict outcomes (such as in the formula "formal education and training, appropriately selected and provided, results in corresponding employment on a secure basis and, for the good achievers, career advancement"), their logic becomes redundant – above all, for those expected, cajoled, or forced to pass through their machinery...they must gain access to and acquire competence for a "second system" – effectively a communication network – in which they learn to play a gameboard whose configurations change with every move. What kinds of knowledge and skills underly and are required by such a transitions game?"

These are questions which might be addressed in this project by listening to the narratives of young people who have initiated their own experiences of informal vocational learning. If it is true that the ways in which legitimate knowledge is being produced are changing (see for example, Gibbons et al 1995 for a discussion of Mode 2 knowledge production), then the transmission of traditional knowledge and skills in formal settings is less significant in the broad scheme of things. More significant is what young people do in responding to the complexities and difficulties faced in the transition to adult identity, including their strategies for managing entry to the labour market and the workplace.

RE-THEORISING YOUTH TRANSITIONS

One of the main aims of this paper has been to contextualise this research project in relation to current data on young people in school to work transitions and the implications of this data. The current RCVET project (RP101) seeks to add to this discussion by considering the broader question of what it is that young people are doing and learning when they seek out informal vocational experiences for themselves. It is interested in the type of knowledge needed to engage in such activities and wishes to explore concepts of the self-efficacy of young people engaging with the world of work. It looks at the questions posed by Chisholm (1999) about how young people respond when the existing transitions systems appear to have lost their efficacy. It is also interested in exploring the types of knowledge generated by these informal processes.

Positioning the research in this way links it to a wider theoretical discussion about the nature of the transformation of Western industrialised societies and the challenges this creates for young people and policy makers alike. This discussion has as its key underpinning idea that -

Young people today are growing up in a different world to that experienced by previous generations – changes which are significant enough to merit a reconceptualization of youth transitions and processes of social reproduction (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997 p.6).

Re-thinking youth policy in this way draws on key concepts such as 'individualisation' and 'risk' in the work of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991, both cited in Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Beck's concept of risk portrays the world of late modernity where 'predictabilities and certainties characteristic of the industrial era are threatened and a new set of risks and opportunities are brought into existence' (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997 p.3). This theorisation concedes that risk is not equally distributed in society and that the inequity traditional to class-based society is still apparent, however, it also proposes that social structures have fragmented and collective identities have weakened, leading to a greater sense of individualisation.

Beck argues that in late modernity, risks have become "individualised" and people increasingly regard setbacks and crises as individual shortcomings, rather than as outcomes of processes which are beyond their personal control (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997 p.4).

The implications of this conceptualisation for youth in transition are clearly important. As McKenzie (2000) acknowledges, current data on Australian youth points towards greater individualisation in the transition processes. This interpretation of the data fits well with this theoretical discussion which suggests that -

because there are a much greater range of pathways to choose from, young people may develop the impression that their own route is unique and that the risks they face are to be overcome as individuals rather than as members of a collectivity (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997 p.7).

The proposed results of this individualisation is further linked to the wider issue of transition to adult identity for young people, since it seems that this process forces young people "to put themselves at the centre of their plans and reflexively construct their social biographies" (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997 p.4). Perhaps in constructing these biographies, young people may be finding different ways of negotiating the transition to adult status and placing different emphases on the traditional markers of adult status such as full-time work. They may be relying on different "guarantees" in the transition process and they may be defining "successful" transition in new ways.

The research project aims to contribute to current debate about the complexity of the transition process. It acknowledges the validity of the critique in the Australian literature that current policy provisions are not in sync with the needs and experiences of youth in transition, especially those in the 15-19 years age group. This work also acknowledges that the traditional structures (class, family, education, qualifications) still play a part in the transition process but no longer provide guarantees of "successful" transition into employment (one of the traditional markers of adulthood) and considers the concepts of 'individualisation' and 'risk' as relevant theorisations of the current transition process. The empirical work on this project therefore aims to look at the experiences of young people who have initiated their own involvement in the workplace and will examine the informal learning that takes place in these sites.

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