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Innovative research in employment

**CONTEMPORARY SCHOOL TO WORK
TRANSITIONS:
A Literature Review**

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Introduction

Youth Transitions in Contemporary Western Society

Within the life course sociological perspective, major life transitions have long been regarded as highly sensitive phases for the interplay of socio-structural, institutional and individual forces. However, if “transitions in general hold the promise of amplifying the effects of differential social and individual resources for the individual’s future”, then according to Heckhausen, (2002: 174) “this is even more true for the transition from school to work”. While commonly held understandings of adulthood consider that full-time employment, independent accommodation and/or having one’s own family have been successfully attained (Riele, 2004), commentators agree that today, few young people accomplish smooth and easy transitions to adulthood. Of particular concern to this review is young people’s transition from school to work, which in contemporary society is a process typically regarded as being more difficult, complex, and fragmented than for previous generations (Felstead, Krahn & Powell, 1997; Lowe, 2001; Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Autio & Palovaara, 2003; Mortimer, 2003; Dusseldorp, 2005). In this regard, the increasingly discontinuous, protracted, and less predictable nature of youth transitions might be considered “the dominant theme” in the European and North American literature, (Lowe, 2001: 29) and arguably, in the Australian and New Zealand literature as well. Indeed, recent research from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) states: “most commentators agree on the existence of significant problems in the school to work area across all advanced economies” (Ryan, 1999: 438). Identifying the precise nature, causes, and possible solutions to such difficulties faced by youth has thus emerged as a key concern in current research and policy initiatives for young people.

A particularly strong thread in the research literature is that contemporary labour market entry for youth is far riskier, with the options facing young people more numerous and diverse than for previous generations (Lowe, 2001; Anderson, Bechhofer, McCrone, Jamieson, Li & Stewart, 2005; Goodwin & O’Connor, 2005; Hunt, 2005). At the same time, the contemporary rhetoric of individualism (which researchers typically connect to the widespread predominance of neo-liberal economic ideology) values and rewards individuals who assume responsibility for the unfolding events of their career. However, if today’s young people must construct and realise their own ‘biography’, then they must also take responsibility for failing to make a successful transition to working life (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Riele, 2004; Hunt, 2005). Such rhetoric is entirely at odds with a substantial body of empirical studies on youth transitions that demonstrates the profound and persistent influence of structural disadvantages (particularly those relating to gender, ethnicity, social class and the region in which a young person attempts to enter the labour market) on the experiences of young people (Shanahan, 2000; Barklamb, 2001; Canny, 2001; Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Heckhausen, 2002; Isengard, 2003; Mills, 2004; Riele, 2004; Hunt, 2005; Kellock, 2005). Arguably, these studies offer abundant support for the argument that while the current era of late modernity might appear to have radically opened the available choices and opportunities for young people, these choices are in many cases strongly constrained by factors outside an individual’s control.

Evidence that young people's failure to make a successful early transition to working life is associated with a long-term risk of social and economic marginalisation (Kellock, 2005) presents an ominous outlook for the sector of the youth population who seem to consistently slip through the gaps. Many writers agree that the long term negative effects of social exclusion caused by unemployment are cumulative across the life course (Shanahan, 2000; Canny, 2001; Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Heckhausen, 2002; Isengard, 2003; Mills, 2004; Kellock, 2005). Nonetheless, while the OECD regarded youth unemployment as the biggest problem facing OECD countries (OECD, 2002), a more pressing issue for young people with educational credentials is underemployment (Barklamb, 2001; Lowe, 2001; Brynin, 2002; Gangl, 2002). Faced with a highly uncertain youth labour market, young people are often choosing to stay in education longer in order to improve their chance of success. However, delaying entry into the labour market effectively prolongs the transitional stage which, as Riele (2004: 244) puts it, leads to a situation of "ambiguous dependency" on parents and education that remains at variance with young people's participation in other areas of adult life. Other writers, such as Lowe (2001) and Roberts (2004) go further, arguing that educational expansion has done little more than raise expectations regarding future employability and economic reward; this represents a dubious outcome that has actually exacerbated, rather than resolved, young people's transition difficulties.

The purpose of this literature review is to explore current thinking about youth transitions in contemporary western societies. It is by no means an exhaustive review, being merely indicative of key themes in the literature. The paper is structured around three broad sections. In the first section, a number of recent changes in western economies are identified and their perceived implications for youth are indicated. These changes primarily relate to the impact of globalisation, neo-liberal economics, and technological innovation on working lives. It is argued that the associated alterations in the skills profile demanded by employers and the growth of new forms of flexible employment present considerable challenges for all workers, but particularly for young workers who face increasing difficulties gaining work experience and securing full-time employment. Evidence that the cultural significance of work in western consumerist cultures might be shifting, especially for young people, is also examined.

Against the backdrop provided by the first section, the second section comprises a discussion on key policy trends for youth. The main theme that is the focus of particularly critical examination, concerns the widespread trend towards educational expansion prompted by governments keen to maximise their competitive economic advantage and by young people concerned to minimise their risk of failure in the labour market. Other strategies for addressing youth transitions, namely programmes for disadvantaged youth, vocational or apprenticeship systems, and attempts to match education with the demands of the labour market, are briefly considered.

In exploring the rhetoric of current education and transition policy, the final section aims to identify problematic assumptions that are part of such policies. Drawing on a range of recent research, the assumption that successful transitions are linear and unidirectional are deliberated and disjunctures highlighted. A key focus is to determine the effect of neo-liberal economic rhetoric on transition policy; hence, notions of choice, opportunity, planning, control, and the individualising of success and failure are explored. The section ends with a discussion on youth unemployment.

Reference to research that establishes the ongoing impact of structural disadvantages on young people's life chances is used to argue that, contrary to many of the individualistic assumptions inherent in policy, the contemporary life course remains highly predictable to a large degree. It is concluded that the ideological underpinnings of policy, and hence the expectations of youth, are often contradicted by the stark realities of contemporary labour markets.

Section 1

Major Changes in Contemporary Society and the Perceived Implications for Youth School to Work Transitions

A central principle in life course sociology is that the historical time and social context during which particular phases of life are entered has a major impact on the experience of individuals. Particularly in rapidly changing societies, a description that is broadly applicable to most western nations, “varying years of birth expose individuals to different historical worlds with distinctive priorities, constraints, and options” (Elder, 1995: 107). In this respect, comparative and longitudinal empirical studies of the experiences of age cohorts bear out this notion by confirming the key role of the socio-historical context in shaping the aspirations and occupational outcomes of young people (Schoon & Parsons, 2002). While the diversity of contemporary youth transitions arguably makes it more difficult to describe typical cohort experience (Felstead et al., 1997; Shanahan, 2000; Lowe, 2001), there appears to be a unique combination of factors specific to the climate and culture of late modernity that exerts considerable influence on the labour market entry and subsequent career development of young people in western societies. As the following discussion will show, changes in western economies, labour markets and the cultural significance of work form a dynamic backdrop to the individual experiences of young people today.

At the most general level, it is well recognised that western societies are currently experiencing a major historical transformation that is largely attributed to the post-industrialised era in which we now live (Lowe, 2001). Contemporary labour markets have experienced a range of shifts, with the New Zealand labour market for instance, undergoing major neo-liberal economic reforms (including privatisation) during the 1980s (Maani, 1999). Worldwide, globalisation has led to a decline in the influence of local economies and the rapid growth of multinational companies operating in a global marketplace (Strathdee, 2001; Buchmann, 2002). In consequence, “fragmented, flexible production, and irresistible networks of financial flows now circulate on an international scale” (Odi, 2003: 297). According to Castells (1998, cited in Odi, 2003: 297), global capitalism has wrought unprecedented changes in society, bringing about “a new social structure, the network society; a new economy, the informational economy; and a new culture, the culture of real virtuality”. The pervasive influence of neo-liberal economic rhetoric, in which the requirements of the free market are primary, has stimulated a strong response amongst developed nations to place progressively more emphasis on strengthening the links between human capital formation and economic policy in order to improve comparative economic advantage (Roberts, 2004; Dusseldorp, 2005; Hunt, 2005).

Many researchers are critical of the impact of such shifts. Colley (2000, in Irving & Malik, 2005), for example, argues that globalisation has created greater inequalities in income, weakened trade union protection and promoted casualised work with lower pay. The post-Fordist growth of service economies has frequently required companies to undertake economic restructuring, downsizing, and reorganisation to an extent that has fundamentally altered labour market dynamics and significantly reshaped working life (Elman & O’Rand, 2002). Demographically, women delaying

childbirth (OECD, 2002; Giele & Holst, 2004), declining family size, lengthening life span (Larson, Wilson, Brown, Furstenberg, & Verma, 2002) and more extensive education and training has resulted in the relative size of the youth cohort falling. This means there are now fewer young people entering the labour market (Lynch, 1999; Gangl, 2002; OECD, 2002). In Australia, policy makers often assume that the country's 'demographic squeeze' will eventually benefit the youth labour market (Dusseldorp, 2005). However, OECD research continues to find that despite aging populations and today's young people being more highly educated, the economic state of the average young person in OECD countries, if not worse, at least "falls short of what is desirable" (Bowers, Sonnet & Bardone, 1999: 39). According to a 2005 Dusseldorp report, on average it is taking longer for a young person in Australia (as in most OECD countries) to make a successful transition to sustainable employment. Furthermore, while most young people seem to eventually settle into a stable work pattern, the exceptions to this norm are increasingly numerous (Lowe, 2001).

In such a rapidly changing and increasingly insecure context, the overall effect is that youth are choosing to stay longer in school and are more likely to enter post-compulsory education (Lowe, 2001; Strathdee, 2001; Roberts, 2004). This trend is reflected across all OECD countries, (Lynch, 1999; Maani, 1999; Picot, Heisz & Nakamura, 2001; Gangl, 2002; OECD, 2002; Mortimer, 2003) and indeed, has constituted a major directive in youth policy for at least the past two decades in which the aims of education have been increasingly linked to the needs of a free market economy. In the free market, education, itself now a commodity purchased by way of fees and loans, is thought to simultaneously establish a meritocracy, enhance equality of opportunity and contribute to economic growth (Hunt, 2005). Yet despite today's young people being more highly educated, companies appear to be finding it more difficult now than ever before to recruit suitable staff (Maani, 1999; Hutchinson, 2003; Dusseldorp, 2005). A September 2005 New Zealand Department of Labour *Skills in the Labour Market* survey found that although the severity of skills shortages has somewhat abated in recent months, 45 percent of the businesses surveyed had difficulties finding skilled staff. A further 26 percent reported problems finding unskilled staff, with 24 percent of the companies overall stating that an inadequate supply of labour was the main factor constraining the expansion of their business. In light of a similar state of affairs in Australia, the Dusseldorp report argued:

A serious disconnection exists between national labour market and skill development policy and the under-participation of a substantial number of young people, with severe implications: not just in terms of lost opportunities for individuals, but also in terms of Australia's future economic prosperity (Dusseldorp, 2005: 3).

If the persistent impact of skills shortages and gaps in the New Zealand and Australian labour markets is anything to go by, then a serious disjuncture is apparent between the neo-liberal ideological underpinnings of educational expansion and the actual demands of employers. Hutchinson (2003) for instance, writes that if skilled workers are not readily available, New Zealand businesses tend to recruit skilled workers from overseas rather than take the longer-term approach of growing skills at home. With "businesses...not giving young people enough opportunities to grow their skills on-the-job" (Hutchinson, 2003: 2), even well-educated youth are

experiencing greater hurdles in gaining the experience necessary for making a successful and sustainable transition into the job market (Lowe, 2001).

One reason why such chronic skill shortages now plague many developed countries is that enormous changes in what constitutes valuable human capital have taken place, creating a mismatch between skill demand and supply. A major factor behind the promotion of global competition has been the increasingly central role of technology in the workplace. As Buchmann (2002) puts it, unprecedented technological transformation has resulted in a major change to the skills profile required by employers, which increasingly affects even manual workers. Poorly qualified early school leavers, who in the past were reasonably assured of obtaining unskilled labour, now experience difficulties securing employment (Skill New Zealand, 2000; Strathdee, 2001; Roberts, 2004; Hunt, 2005). Moreover, while computer literacy and cutting-edge technological skills are now considered highly valuable resources for individuals to obtain, in the event of the so-called 'knowledge economy', employers frequently demand multi-skilled 'knowledge workers'. The specialised vocational skills of such workers are ideally supplemented with 'core skills' (general numeracy, literacy, computer, and increasingly, language skills), in addition to problem solving and creative thinking abilities, and interpersonal and teamwork skills (Lynch, 1999; Barklamb, 2001; OECD, 2002). What is more, workers are expected to demonstrate specific 'personal qualities' that are highly valued in the modern workplace, namely, a suitable orientation to work and an appreciation of enterprise (Barklamb, 2001).

Post-industrialism has also led to employment systems that, in the main, might be described as more "fragmented, fluid, and diverse" (Lowe, 2001: 38) than in the past. The traditional or standardised 'norm' of permanent, full-time, waged or salaried work for a single employer is increasingly regarded as reflecting an earlier era, namely, the male dominated, mass production systems and industrial and white collar unionism of post-war industrial capitalism (Spoonley & McLaren, 2003). Multiple writers report a significant growth in various types of 'flexible' non-standard work (Felstead et al., 1997; Buchmann, 2002; Elman & O'Rand, 2002; Odih, 2003; Spoonley & McLaren, 2003; Worth, 2003; Mills, 2004; Giele & Holst, 2004; Bauman, 2005), which most agree tends to be less secure than permanent work, offering lower remuneration, fewer benefits and fewer opportunities for gaining skills or to invest in training and education. According to Spoonley and McLaren (2003), in New Zealand (as elsewhere amongst most advanced economies), these non-traditional forms of work (which include part-time, casual, temporary, own account self-employment, and holding multiple jobs) are growing at a faster rate than standardised employment. Current labour policy in New Zealand, however, still reflects the assumption of standardised employment being the norm, even though it appears likely it could rapidly become an ideal.

In Canada, Lowe (2001) reports that the standard job is now less common amongst youth than any other age cohort, although Felstead et al. (1997) point out that it is also becoming less common for older workers. Australia reflects a similar trend, with the youth labour market increasingly characterised by casualisation (Riele, 2004; Tresize-Brown, 2005; Kellock, 2005). While Spoonley and McLaren's (2003) study of the New Zealand labour market perhaps places more emphasis on the overrepresentation of women, ethnic minorities and immigrants in non-standard work, they do note that with regard to age cohorts, the highest proportion (44.5 percent) of casual workers

were in the 15-24 age group. A possible interpretation of these studies is that it is the most vulnerable workers who are required to undertake the most insecure work. While the trend towards flexible forms of work is often associated with an ideology that suggests it fits better with people's lives (for example, working mothers), Dupuis, Inkson and McLaren (2005) found that the preference amongst 97 percent of the full-time workers in their sample was still for permanent, full-time work. Likewise, Lowe (2001) reported that although an upsurge in young, self-employed workers in Canada might be interpreted as a rise in entrepreneurialism, he argued that for some, self-employment represented a labour market adaptation rather than a destination of choice. Overall, Lowe (2001: 36) argues, "the polarization between skilled, challenging, and rewarding jobs, on the one hand, and unskilled, low-wage, and insecure jobs, on the other, has come to define contemporary work". Finally, it is worth noting that the ability of workers to succeed in the world of flexible work might rely on them possessing a particular set of personal, educational, and work-related aptitudes. As Worth (2003) points out, the ethic of adaptability and self-management promoted by flexible work practices most negatively affects the young unemployed who have limited formal skills and work-related attitudes deemed 'inappropriate'.

Some writers suggest there has been a shift in the cultural significance individuals attach to work, reflecting the rampant consumerism in contemporary culture. As Bauman (2005) tells us, the shift to modernity was associated with the rise of the work ethic, work being constructed as a meaningful activity because it enabled individuals to fulfil their duties to family and wider society. Whereas during modernity personal identity was largely connected to a person's job, Bauman argues that in contemporary society, identity has become connected primarily to consumption. As such, identity itself is an increasingly volatile concept, and might be best described in terms of multifaceted 'aggregate identities', loosely arranged around purchasable, consumable goods, and as such, always remaining subject to improvement or replacement. Echoing Bauman, Hunt (2005) argues that contemporary economics has shifted focus from manufacturing to marketing. This shift bears especial significance for today's fashionable and brand-conscious youth whose tendency to construct identities based on music, style and leisure makes them particularly vulnerable to the 'identity scripts' cleverly manipulated by marketers. Indeed, research in the United States shows that the trend towards combining part-time work with school is partly attributed to the pressures to spend money on designer clothing, stereo equipment, movies, eating out, drugs and alcohol (McLaren, 2002).

In light of these changes, the meaning of work itself has also been radically reinterpreted. In a consumer society, work is no longer primarily about duty but about individual experience. In this respect, work should not just provide one with an income, but should be pleasurable in and of itself:

Like other life activities, work now comes first and foremost under aesthetic scrutiny. Its value is judged by its capacity to generate pleasurable experience. Work devoid of such capacity – that does not offer 'intrinsic satisfaction' – is also work devoid of value (Bauman, 2005: 33).

In this regard, it is relevant to cite Walton and Mallon's (2004) study of how contemporary New Zealanders made sense of their careers in which 61 percent of their participants cited 'enjoyment' as integral to their view of career. ('Enjoyment'

was regarded as an umbrella term that included satisfaction, happiness, pleasure and being interested in your job.) Walton and Mallon suggest that career enjoyment is what distinguishes participants' career expectations from those of their parents' generation. Their research is in line with other writers such as Baethge (1994, cited in Buchmann, 2002), who speaks of the "normative subjectivisation" of work, or the idea that people want to be seen as unique individuals with regard to their motivations, needs and competencies, and ideally, to be able to express this individuality in their work. In the same vein, Øian (2004) points out that contemporary notions of the career are no longer restricted to the conventional dimension of employment, but also strongly encompass the social and symbolic aspects of consumption as lifestyles become an important dimension of status and identity. In sum, the ideal contemporary career is an "expression of success in self-improvement" (Øian, 2004: 186) that assumes the progressive accumulation of social and economic capital across the working life of the individual.

This shift in the value or meaning of work has not happened independently of the changing structure of work and the labour market, however. Buchmann (2002) considers that it is the interplay of these two factors that has resulted in employees having to handle more challenging tasks and types of work at the same time as demanding greater quality in their experience of work. According to Tresize-Brown (2005), young people now enter the labour market with distinct ideas and expectations for their working life. The so-called 'Generation Y', born from 1981 onwards, wants work to be fun, relaxed, low key and non-traditional. They want to undertake challenging and meaningful work and have flexibility in day-to-day scheduling. They want to be treated as colleagues, not kids, and be rewarded with increasing responsibility, and they show a strong tendency towards horizontal mobility, moving across different work settings and gaining a range of experiences rather than demonstrating traditional vertical mobility up an organisational ladder.¹ As the Science Manager (2005) guide to 'getting workplace value from Generation Y' states, it is critical for employers to adjust to this new working culture because the technological expertise of the generation for whom computers, cell phones and the Internet are as standard as television and mass media is to Generation X (born between 1961 and 1980) is "increasingly becoming the talent that business needs to establish competitive advantage". However, employers often experience difficulties in retaining younger workers. One possible explanation is that Generation Y perceives that diverse experiences and ongoing training opportunities are critical to their long-term success in the labour market. Research conducted by Tresize-Brown (2005) found that while external job training was a low priority for employers, both internal and external job training was a high priority for more than a third of the young workers in her sample.

A possible disjuncture thus exists between the ideas and expectations young people may hold regarding work and the attitudes towards work employers are accustomed to in their staff. However, today's young workers are often balancing a range of life commitments, and moreover, in tending to downplay work as central to identity, they are also far less willing to make sacrifices for their job (Tresize-Brown, 2005). There is strong evidence that perceptions of parents' work attitudes and experiences shape the development of children's attitudes towards work. During the 1980s and 1990s,

¹ This tendency towards horizontal mobility is reflective of a general shift in the way career development is understood in contemporary society and will be explored in more detail in Section 3.

Generation Y was exposed to the economic restructuring and downsizing that saw their parents (and other workers) dismissed from their positions. Loughlin and Barling (2001) cite a barrage of research that suggests that the cynical work attitudes of young people today convey this sense of betrayal. The catch phrase of Generation Y is that they want to 'work to live not live to work', in other words, the ideal is for work that "[provides] the income to do what they want to do" (Tresize-Brown, 2005: 5). Consequently, because younger workers do not frame their work in terms of making an investment in their future with a company, they want immediate payoffs from the workplace.

Given the evidence that globalisation and technological change have radically altered the landscape of contemporary working life, it is not surprising that the nature of youth transitions has likewise undergone significant transformation. Considering also that the school to work transition occurs at a particularly sensitive phase of the life course and in such a rapidly changing context, it is not surprising that even highly educated youth increasingly experience difficulties. A key concern for western governments is how to address the numerous problems that plague youth transitions. However, as the following discussion will show, considerable cynicism and pessimism surrounds the efficacy of much youth policy. Particularly noteworthy is recent research that is highly critical of one of the most common policy initiatives: educational expansion.

Section 2

Focused Discussion on Key Education and Transition Policy Initiatives

The trend towards investing in human capital across most western countries, including New Zealand, is well recognised in the literature (Lynch, 1999; Maani, 1999; Teichler, 1999; Picot et al., 2001; Gangl, 2002; OECD, 2002; Roberts, 2004). Many authors agree that this massive expansion of post-compulsory education is a policy that reflects the growing centrality of neo-liberal economic thought at multiple levels of contemporary society. An interesting way of tracing this trend in education policy is to examine the key directives of the OECD, which has long served as a think-tank and advisory agency for developed nations. Teichler (1999) writes that in the early and mid-1960s, the OECD advocated general educational expansion in upper secondary and higher education as a means to secure economic growth. By the late 1960s to early 1970s, there was a motivation to address inequality of opportunity and a corresponding emphasis on nations developing a strong general curriculum in schools. Up to the early 1980s, concerns about the economic recession in many OECD countries meant that employability became a major focus, which led the OECD to promote the value of work and school-based vocational training. Over the last two decades, however, the influence of neo-liberal economic thought has led to a primary concern with the contribution that education might make to economic growth. The rhetoric of policy has likewise shifted to emphasise competitiveness.

At the same time, problematic levels of youth unemployment and the general insecurity of the labour market is also at work in the governmental push for educational expansion. As Roberts (2004) reports, the economic depression in the 1980s in Britain caused mass youth unemployment. In light of the loss of many manufacturing and textile companies, which had traditionally provided a pool of unskilled labouring jobs for youth, the government was prompted to encourage young people to complete senior secondary education. A similar policy tactic has been employed in Australia in light of high youth unemployment, increasing casualisation and a lack of permanent, full-time jobs, especially for young people without post-compulsory qualifications (Riele, 2004). To a large degree, youth appear to have successfully integrated the perceived importance of education for obtaining a 'good' job into their personal biographies with, according to Lowe (2001), even Canadian high school dropouts advocating the virtues of formal education. This favourable view of education is probably supported by evidence that, by and large, education still pays off in the long run. In a study in Canada, for instance, seven years after graduating with an undergraduate degree, more than 80 percent of the sample held a managerial or professional job (Lowe, 2001). However, several researchers express concerns about the policy of educational expansion (Felstead et al., 1997; Lynch, 1999; Lowe, 2001; Roberts, 2004; Riele, 2004; Hunt, 2005). In particular, Roberts' (2004) scathing critique of recent trends in the United Kingdom education system is worth examining more closely.

In 1972 in the United Kingdom, the most common age at which young people commenced their full-time working lives was 16. Nowadays, 50 percent of young people have reached the age of 21 before they have left education and commenced

full-time jobs. By age 30, over 40 percent have received some form of tertiary education and, as Roberts reports, the government intends to raise this figure to 50 percent by 2010. At the same time, students' thirst for qualifications, the ability of parents to exercise greater choice with regard to educational establishments, and lucrative government funding regimes, has heightened the interest of institutions in recruiting and retaining students. In the interests of securing 'bums-on-seats', Roberts suggests that institutions are possibly increasing rates of higher education by lowering standards so that "qualifications...are now within the reach of the functionally illiterate and/or innumerate" (Roberts, 2004: 207). While Roberts is careful to note the contentious nature of this particular claim, it appears there are some grounds to argue that the trend towards staying longer in education has resulted in a generation of young people who are over-qualified and over-ambitious. For instance, the government assures young people that:

...a university degree should add over £400,000, roughly doubling their lifetime earnings. In fact typical rates of return have been closer to 20% and £80,000 over a working lifetime (Roberts, 2004: 208)².

However, as Roberts argues, because post-compulsory education now comes at significant financial cost to students, presenting higher education as an investment in an individual's future financial return arguably does little more than raise young people's expectations, rarely paying off in real monetary terms. Furthermore, in the United Kingdom, youth unemployment is still a serious problem and many of the initiatives for addressing the issue have seemingly failed. However, in Roberts' view, high youth unemployment and the upgrading of young people's qualifications are part of the same configuration. His reasoning, and supporting evidence, constitutes a dismal view of the current and future youth labour market in the United Kingdom.

Briefly, the main points outlined by Roberts note that the pace of raising qualifications has exceeded the pace of occupational upgrading, leading to massive over-qualification with greater numbers of qualified young people competing for the same number of jobs. In this regard, underemployment is often considered the most noteworthy problem for young workers possessing educational credentials (Barklamb, 2001; Lowe, 2001; Brynin, 2002; Gangl, 2002). Gangl's (2002) study of the changing labour markets and early career outcomes in Europe over the last decade provides a more comprehensive explanation, noting that it is primarily occupational upgrading and educational expansion that affects patterns of matching in occupational allocation. In his view, ongoing educational expansion, particularly at the tertiary level, may trigger downward substitution processes that lead young people with qualifications to take employment in lower level occupations than in the past. Two cases in point are the Spanish and Italian youth labour markets in which massive increases in school enrolments have drastically reduced the traditional employment-related advantages of obtaining more education (Barklamb, 2001). In Canada, Lowe (2001) reports that graduates from 'non-professional' programmes (namely, the arts, humanities, and social sciences) tend to be seen as having less 'employability' skills. The resulting underemployment and skills mismatch of such graduates particularly affects women, as they are more attracted to those areas of study.

² Maani (1999) writes that during 1981-1991 in New Zealand, the relative returns graduates could expect from tertiary education increased. During the period 1991-1996 however, returns stabilised for men and declined for women. For the period 1997-2002, Maani and Maloney (2004) found no statistical support that returns to higher education had either risen or fallen.

In such a climate, Roberts states that it is the least qualified young people who will become progressively more disadvantaged, a point also argued by Lynch (1999),³ Gangl (2002), and Schoon and Parsons (2002). With employers now able to be more discriminating regarding whom they hire, they are increasingly reluctant to employ those who have seemingly been selected out. Brynin (2002) argues that this is partly because qualifications are being bunched at higher levels so that employers cannot easily discriminate between the different skill levels of graduates, reducing the overall rewards for skills. In this regard, it is highly applicable to cite Gangl's (2002) argument that individual qualifications mediate somewhat against macro level changes in society, so that the relatively least qualified will always have the most difficulties in rapidly changing labour markets. What this suggests is that raising education levels for all youth, in itself, possibly generates little improvement for less educated young people without some sort of interlinked macro-economic policy that creates new jobs. A final point made by Roberts is that the severe labour market difficulties of the least and moderately qualified youth act as incentives for all young people to improve their own education, which simply exacerbates the whole cycle. In sum, Roberts considers that the major policy in the United Kingdom of increasing education for young people has actually exacerbated transition difficulties.

As noted in the introductory section, researchers find that there seems to be a sector of the youth population that consistently falls through the gaps, experiencing cumulative social exclusion and marginalisation. While this population is increasingly the target of specialised training and education programmes (Ryan, 1999; OECD, 2002), there is considerable pessimism regarding the effectiveness of many of these programmes. As Roberts (2004) puts it, when special training provisions are made for the 'excluded', those provisions (and consequently the clients), often become stigmatised. In the United Kingdom, Youth Training Programmes have certainly pushed young people into regular jobs, but they are typically jobs that involve hard work, low pay and minimal learning. Such programmes have done little to raise young people's skill levels and improve their future employability (Ryan, 1999). Hutchinson (2003) reports that many of the usual government prescriptions for unemployed youth, including job search assistance, training programmes, work schemes and wage subsidies, amount to little more than "passive and palliative measures" (Hutchinson, 2003: 9). There is thus considerable doubt that these measures have achieved any improvement for youth transitions at all. In Australia, for example, despite a series of reforms to school systems, transition services and employment networks over the past decade, almost a quarter of young people nationally still leave school before completing Year 12 (around age 17-18). Many subsequently become unemployed, work in part-time low skilled jobs or drop out of the labour market altogether. Moreover, significant problems appear to have plagued many Australian transition programmes, including bureaucracy, governments not providing key service agencies and information and programmes in the main being unsuccessful in engaging industry (Kellock, 2005).

The programmes that do seem to work are generally those that provide serious learning content and private sector sponsorship. These more ambitious programmes

³ A specific example of how progressive disadvantage might occur concerns the acquisition of skills in the form of workplace training. Individuals with higher education are more likely to receive employer-provided training, thereby creating, as Lynch (1999) puts it, a 'virtuous' and 'vicious' cycle of human capital accumulation.

usually comprise integrated vocational-academic curricula. However, the greater expense involved makes their widespread adoption problematic (Ryan, 1999). Autio and Palovaara (2003) have had good results with a programme developed along these lines in Finland that emphasises the early identification of possible underachievers, regular interventions, and one-on-one contact and support over a long period of time. Likewise, Kellock's (2005) review of transition programmes in Australia notes that intensive support and more attention given to the whole person (such as the mental health aspect of transitions) usually produces better outcomes. Some writers also show support for 'welfare to work' programmes that focus on the 'activation' of the unemployed (OECD, 2002; Hutchinson, 2003).

Historically, 'dual systems' (that is, vocational or apprenticeship) programmes have created good outcomes for young people. In Germany, Austria and Denmark, around two-fifths of any age cohort undertakes apprenticeships. France, Sweden, Switzerland and the Netherlands also have reasonably extensive vocational training (Ryan, 1999; Heinz, 2002). It is commonly considered that strong vocational training produces far less turbulence in the school to work transition when compared with the United Kingdom and United States, systems that focus on a general education (Buchmann, 2002; Korpi, Graaf, Hendrickx & Layte, 2003). In Britain and the United States young people have little vocational preparation, yet at the same time, employers increasingly demand practical work experience before they are willing to employ a young person (Isengard, 2003). However, while dual systems of vocational preparation are often touted as an ideal way to link education and occupational outcomes, not all commentators are convinced of the inherent beneficence of this approach (Ryan, 1999; OECD, 2002). Buchmann (2002), for instance, notes that employers in nations with a strong tradition of vocational education and apprenticeships are now demanding a more general education that emphasises the development of abstract thinking and analytical competencies in addition to occupation-specific skills. The result, at least in the Swiss labour market, is a growing mismatch between skill demand and supply.

A key concern in recent education policy in New Zealand is to develop an integrated system of pathways from school to work that no longer uses a 'one size fits all' approach, aiming instead to design individual pathways into participation, training and employment (Skill New Zealand, 2000). A critical part of the success of such policy is growing connections with local businesses. This is a key focus of programmes such as Gateway⁴ and STAR,⁵ which give students hands-on work experience or tertiary level training, and Modern Apprenticeships.⁶ A recent policy response to the presence of skills shortages and gaps is attempting to match education with the needs of the labour market. The New Zealand Department of Labour's 'Human Capability Framework,' for instance, attempts to match the capacity (skills, knowledge, and attitudes) of individuals with opportunities for paid or unpaid work in the marketplace. Barklamb (2002) likewise argues that education and training must match the needs of evolving industry. However, a key issue seems to be how education systems might keep up with the seemingly ever-increasing pace of evolving technology and industries.

⁴ More information about Gateway can be accessed on the Tertiary Education Commission website www.tec.govt.nz

⁵ More information about STAR can be accessed on through the Resourcing Division at the Ministry of Education www.minedu.govt.nz

⁶ More information about Modern Apprenticeships is available on the Modern Apprenticeships New Zealand website www.modern-apprenticeships.govt.nz

In summary, at the same time as youth education and transition policy has become a major concern for western governments, it would appear that results, at best, have been mixed. A possible explanation supported by a growing body of literature is that the rhetoric of policy contains inherent assumptions about youth transitions that do not always reflect what young people actually experience in their attempts to secure employment. The following section considers this argument by exploring a number of assumptions in youth policy. The final discussion of the impact of structural disadvantage on youth transitions, with particular reference to the problem of youth unemployment, indicates the presence of a gap between the expectations of policy and the lived realities of young people's lives.

Section 3

Rhetoric and Assumptions in Education and Transition Policy

Evans and Furlong (1997, in Goodwin & O'Connor 2005) have traced the metaphorical categorisation of youth transitions over several decades. They report that the term 'niches' was predominantly used in the 1960s, 'pathways' in the 1970s, 'trajectories' in the 1980s, with a turn to the more reflexive and poststructuralist notion of 'navigation' in the 1990s. What all these terms have in common, however, is a sense that there is a right job for everyone, and that if young people simply follow the appropriate pathway, or navigate their options correctly, then success will naturally follow. According to writers such as Lowe (2001), Mills (2004), Riele (2004), Walton and Mallon (2004), Dupuis et al. (2005), and Irving and Malik (2005), contemporary youth transition policy predominantly stresses notions of choice, opportunity, individualism, planning and control. Key assumptions include linearity and unidirectionality in transition and the steady accumulation of human capital over the course of a career. In contrast, Irving and Malik (2005) forcefully argue:

Beneath the glowing picture of choice, opportunity, and economic rewards however lies a neo-liberal individualist conception, which belies the notion of social belonging or collective rights. Further, it is these aspects of life that have been increasingly undermined as the global capital message stakes its claim as the core ideology in many western states (Irving & Malik, 2005: 2).

Irving and Malik allege that in contemporary societies, individuals are increasingly held responsible for their own future, regardless of their class, gender, ethnicity or (dis)ability. Moreover, they consider that political rhetoric has largely moved from a discourse of citizens' rights to that of responsibilities, one of which is to avoid social exclusion by getting a good job. In education policy, the primary emphasis is correspondingly on the individual as 'self-determining' with the implied suggestion that failure to secure meaningful employment or a reluctance to make an economic contribution amounts to deviant or disruptive behaviour.

As Riele (2004) writes, the notion of the 'transition' has emerged as the central term for both researchers and policy makers when speaking of the stages that young people traverse in the movement from youth to adulthood and school to work. Yet often implicit within the use of this term are a number of problematic assumptions. Riele takes particular exception to the assumption that successful transitions are linear, which implies order and unidirectionality and a distinct destination (adulthood) at which one 'arrives' (Wyn & White, 1997, in Riele, 2004). However, the assumption that there is a destination is itself highly suspect: how does a young person know they have 'arrived'? As social historians have shown, the conceptualisation of youth as a specific stage between childhood and adulthood is a relatively modern phenomenon, only emerging in western countries around the late nineteenth century (Hunt, 2005). Mortimer (2003) explains that previously, children began their economic contribution to the family at a relatively young age, toiling beside their parents in fields, households or businesses, or learning trades by entering apprenticeships. As formal schooling became established, labour and education became separated and childhood gradually became reconceptualised as a precious formative stage requiring nurturance

and protection, including the avoidance of premature association with labour (Kent, 1978, in Mortimer, 2003).⁷ In contemporary society however, the boundary between childhood and adulthood is in many respects unclear, with young people invariably enacting both adolescent and adult behaviours. For instance, combining part-time work with schooling is increasingly common in developed countries, which researchers consider may, on the one hand, encourage the development of responsibility and facilitate career exploration (Mortimer, 2003), or on the other, foster alcohol use, premature affluence, and cynicism regarding work (McLaren, 2002). In Riele's (2004) view, the prolonged dependence of contemporary youth on education is often at odds with their participation in other areas of adult life, such as independent accommodation and parenthood. In New Zealand, for example, at age 16, young people are legally able to commence sexual relationships and marry (with parental consent) and by 18, they can purchase alcohol and vote. Yet by the time young people finish secondary schooling and tertiary studies, they are typically 21 or 22 before they enter the labour market in anything approaching a permanent or full-time capacity. Just how might we conceptualise, let alone locate, this exceptionally permeable boundary between youth and adulthood?

To return to Riele (2004), the assumption of linearity also underpins the related metaphor of career or employment 'pathways', which as Inkson (2002) argues, strongly implies a sense of journeying along clearly defined pathways that are often prescribed by educational institutions. However, this sense that young people entering the workforce undertake the purposeful pursuit of predefined goals is often at variance with the lived reality of transitions to adulthood, which in many cases are characterised by fragmentation and impermanence, and moreover, broken up with periods of stagnation or even reversal. Such experiences are less akin to a pathway, and as Riele puts it, might be more accurately described in terms of a 'yo-yo'. Riele's comments echo the approach of several researchers who highlight instability in early labour market experience as a key issue for youth, including their tendency to move in and out of jobs and joblessness much more frequently than adults (Ryan, 1999; Shanahan, 2000; Autio & Palovaara, 2003)⁸. Dupuis et al. (2005) also found that, in general, the careers of New Zealand young people were relatively non-linear. The sample in this study showed high levels of job-to-job movement and inter-occupational mobility, and a tendency for young workers to accept employment on the basis of convenience or whim rather than following a planned approach to career development. As Raffe (2003, in Riele, 2004) argues, the discourse of linear transitions and pathways in conventional policy might be largely symbolic or idealistic, reflecting the way policy makers think transitions *should* be achieved, rather than the actual experience of many young people.

Critically exploring the notion of the personal 'career' is a useful way of illustrating the disjuncture between the assumptions invoked by this idea and the changing way in which individuals attempt to make sense of their careers. Current thinking about careers strongly suggests that the traditional view, comprising the linear progression along the occupational or organisational hierarchy, has been gradually eroded in the post-industrial era of organisational change and restructuring (Buchmann, 2002;

⁷ Zelizer's (1985, in Mortimer, 2003) thesis on the historical development of the 'priceless child' documents a similar movement from the economically useful child to the notion that children possess priceless emotional value.

⁸ Ryan (1999) notes that people's early labour market instability is commonly interpreted in two divergent ways, either as unproductive 'churning' or productive search and matching.

Elman & O’Rand, 2002; Walton & Mallon, 2004; Bauman, 2005). Moreover, the sheer velocity of technological change has led to a steady decrease in the temporal validity of skills, ensuring that it has become necessary for workers to undergo loops of retraining in order to remain employable (Buchmann, 2002; Mortimer, 2003; Irving & Malik, 2005). Research conducted by Elman and O’Rand (2002), for example, found that labour market restructuring and higher rates of job mobility amongst middle-aged and older workers meant that demand for adult education continued to rise despite the difficulties retraining mid-career entailed. Amongst their sample, early educational achievement and subsequent work experience did not protect against perceived job insecurity, which was more shaped by the uncertainty of labour market conditions than traditional human capital advantages. Recent discourse on contemporary careers consequently stresses their ‘free-form’ and ‘boundaryless’ nature and makes reference to “flexible career free agents focused on learning and development” (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996, in Walton & Mallon, 2004: 76).

However, Øian (2004) has argued that despite the temporal discontinuities of modern lives, the notion of the career strongly retains a sense of linearity at an individual level. Most of all, a career “means that through processes of accumulation of symbolic, social and material capital, the individual makes a linear progress in time” (Øian, 2004: 186). Commentators also, sometimes betray a commitment to the ideal of linearity. Holland (1992, in Inkson, 2002), for example, holds to a notion of the career as a ‘snowball’, which implies that individuals will experience an aggregation of knowledge and skills over the life course, a metaphor that arguably can take no account of pathway interruption and even less of reversal. However, Walton and Mallon (2004) strongly suggest that notions of hierarchical advancement and the progressive accretion of skills and knowledge continue to resonate in individuals’ understanding of contemporary career realities. This finding was in spite of the participants in their study also recognising that the current environmental conditions of organisational instability and the often short-term nature of employment required people to be more adaptable and flexible, and moreover, to claim a sense of personal ownership of career rather than relying on progression within the organisational hierarchy to lead purposefully towards the realisation of career goals. Walton and Mallon (2004) thus propose a distinction between two levels of career that are held in a dynamic duality. The abstract or espoused level concerns individuals’ constructions of the meaning of their career, while the concrete or actual level might be regarded as reflecting actual working history. What their research suggests is that when faced with a rapidly changing and uncertain environment, individuals rely on notions of linearity to construct a sense of control over their lives even when this does not reflect their working conditions. While this might not be problematic in terms of the sense-making of individuals, the same reliance in the rhetoric of policy is potentially problematic, as the following discussion will demonstrate.

Bound up with notions of linearity in transition pathways is an overemphasis on ‘choice’. There is a growing body of literature that argues that major structural changes in western society have introduced much greater diversity into the life course, especially around the early stages, which is said to signify that the choices available to young people have increased (Anderson et al., 2005). Postmodernists consider that the increased diversity in how youth negotiate their way into adulthood means that the institutions of industrialism are becoming less relevant and exert less influence on young people’s life courses. The sense of multiple and ever-widening opportunities,

which Hunt (2005) connects to the apparent myriad of choices for identity opened up by consumption, suggests young people are enabled to engage in a more individualised process of becoming adults (Shanahan, 2000; Lowe, 2001). Whereas previous generations arguably faced a predictable and stable employment market with few opportunities to exercise choice, young people nowadays are entreated to “construct [their] biographies [themselves]” (Riele, 2004: 245-246). Navigating an appropriate pathway through multiple possible options thus becomes a critical task for young people to accomplish.

The recent initiative piloted in 75 New Zealand schools, *Designing Careers*,⁹ perhaps exemplifies this type of policy in its goal to aid high school students to prepare individual Learning and Career Plans that help students determine their “skills, values, interests and aspirations, and...set goals to help them achieve what they want in life.” Similarly, *Career Services* contains a ‘Pathfinder’ tool that “anyone can use...to figure out what career might suit them...[and] to develop a career plan that outlines the steps they’ll need to take to get to their chosen career” (Department of Labour, *Youth Transitions*, 2005). The message in such directives is clear: anyone can attain their goals if they plan for and follow a defined pathway of education and training. However, Livingston (1998, in Lowe, 2001: 37) considers that the underemployment of many graduates runs counter to the positive tone of this human-resource-development kind of rhetoric, which has a ‘field of dreams’ logic to it implying that high quality employment will naturally follow education. In a similar vein, a finding by Dupuis et al. (2005) that many New Zealand young people considered that their education held little relevance for their current employment would appear to disrupt the assumption that obtaining a desired job or career is simply a matter of choosing to pursue it.

One concern raised in the literature is the impact of individualism on the expectations of young people, with several researchers indicating the presence of a gap between the aspirations that young people entertain regarding their future occupations and the realities of contemporary labour markets. Lowe (2001) argues that the willingness of students in Canada to accept the poor conditions of part-time, temporary and seasonal jobs reflected their expectation that better opportunities awaited them after graduation. However, in Lowe’s view, a university degree is no longer a ticket to a job but merely means that in the period following graduation the chances of unemployment, part-time and temporary work, and low wages are reduced. Even poorly qualified youth appear to hold high expectations for their working life. Strathdee’s (2001) study of male early school leavers in New Zealand, for instance, suggests that when goals are unable to be fulfilled, aspirations, by necessity, are lowered and youths take whatever job they can find by utilising social capital (social networks). For example, one young man who wanted an apprenticeship as a baker ended up with a part-time job cleaning cars (obtained through his mother). Another participant who had hoped for a ‘classy’ job as a travelling salesman or tourist guide took a temporary job as a sock presser at his father’s place of work.

Overall, Roberts’ (2004: 209) critical analysis of the education system in the United Kingdom argues that today’s better-qualified young people cannot expect the level of employment and remuneration “that they were aiming for and have been encouraged

⁹ More information about *Designing Careers* can be accessed through Career Services (www.careers.govt.nz) or the Ministry of Education (www.minedu.govt.nz).

to expect". OECD (2002) research notes that average youth wages relative to adult wages have been falling in all OECD countries, except Sweden. Widespread declining youth share in personal income is associated not only with falling youth employment shares but also declining relative pay and access to social security (Ryan, 1999). Moreover, the oversensitivity of the youth labour market to the general economic state is well recognised in international literature, with the general agreement being that it is the youth labour market that suffers the most during economic recession (Ryan, 1999; Barklamb, 2001; Picot et al., 2001; Gangl, 2002; OECD, 2002). A study in Canada further showed that youth income levels did not substantially recover during economic expansion, although highly educated youth (especially men) showed some recovery (Picot et al., 2001).

Ominously, Roberts (2004) reports that attempts in the United Kingdom to give young people a sense of responsibility and personal ownership regarding their careers have failed. As Riele (2004, citing Beck, 1992) argues, the emphasis on personal responsibility in transition choices contains a problematic tension between young people having the freedom to choose what direction their lives will take (agency) and an intrinsic element of forcing young people to make decisions (coercion). Moreover, the rhetoric of 'choice biographies' rarely emphasises the constraints on young people's choices. Broadly speaking, such constraints typically exist in the form of young people's resources (which characteristically reflect the social class of their family), and their opportunities for education and employment, which might be dependent on various forms of social as well as economic capital, for instance, the opportunities for employment created by access to social networks (Strathdee, 2001). However, as Riele's (2004) study of 'second chance' high schools students shows, such constraints might be as banal as the actions of parents (for example, having to change schools) or the decisions of teachers and schools (for example, expulsion). Finally, conventional policy discourse rarely explores the risks and potential penalties of 'wrong' choices. The overall effect is that young people are likely to blame themselves if they fail to make a successful transition to adulthood.

By and large, the literature is clear about the persistence of deep-rooted structural disadvantages in the school to work transition that place sometimes severe limitations on an individual's freedom to choose. These stark realities, which disrupt the positive and empowering tone of much contemporary youth policy, constitute stubborn problems that have not been resolved despite decades of policy designed to address them. According to Ryan (1999), concerns over structural inequalities are particularly poignant for racial minorities in the United Kingdom and the United States. In the United States, for example, teenage members of racial minorities fare badly overall, with as many as one-third of black male teenagers and one-quarter of black female teenagers formally unemployed, figures that are around double that of the general youth unemployment rate (Lynch, 1999). Most worryingly, there is strong evidence that the social, economic and personal consequences of failed transitions translate into cumulative marginalisation across the remainder of young people's working lives (Shanahan, 2000; Canny, 2001; Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Heckhausen, 2002; Isengard, 2003; Mills, 2004; Kellock, 2005). While Furlong et al. (2002, in Goodwin & O'Connor, 2005: 206) argue that even if many young people still experience relatively linear pathways, "those who experience complex transitions tend to be disadvantaged educationally and socially". What this suggests is that while policy continues to reproduce the rhetoric of individual opportunity, implying that, given the

right skills and attitude any goal might be reached by any individual, the influence of certain 'structural' factors, particularly those relating to gender, ethnicity, social class and the region or area in which a young person attempts to enter the labour market, continue to exert enormous influence on young people's employment outcomes.

The impact of structural inequalities on a young person's life chances is apparent well before young people are ready to attempt the transition from school to work. Schoon and Parsons (2002), for instance, found that parental social class was a strong predictor of both educational achievement and teenage aspirations. While this has much to do with the material circumstances in which children grow up (impact of poverty, access to books, and so forth), if parental aspirations for their child are also low, educational achievement is generally worsened even further. Educational failure is a particularly significant issue for New Zealand, because as Hutchinson (2003) reports, around 20 percent of New Zealand students are systematically falling behind and slipping to the worst standards in the western world. Consequently, against the claim (made by Beck, 1992 & 2000, cited in Mills, 2004) that western society has moved into a post-class era, it remains crucially important for policy makers to take note of numerous empirical studies that show an individual's life chances actually remain highly predictable according to their location in the social structure.

As suggested in the previous section, a key disjuncture in much transition policy is an overemphasis on education, or the 'supply side', when the reality is often that permanent, full-time work that matches the skills profile of young people is increasingly difficult to find. In this regard, the Dusseldorp (2005) report argues that governments need to acknowledge that there is an inadequate pool of decent, full-time work opportunities, especially for poorly qualified early school leavers. Overall, numerous studies report that youth unemployment continues to rise (Lowe, 2001; Strathdee, 2001; Autio & Palovaara, 2003; Roberts, 2004; Riele, 2004; Tresize-Brown, 2005). Nonetheless, the OECD (2002) has reported a slight improvement, or at least a stabilising, of youth unemployment figures across OECD countries since 1983. However, this report cannot be taken on board uncritically because some conjecture remains about the figures for student unemployment, with researchers undecided if this should be included in the overall figures for youth unemployment. According to Gangl (2002: 70) it is primarily macroeconomic effects from demographic pressures and business cycle effects (economic expansion and recession) that impacts on the risk of unemployment. The recent economic growth across OECD countries (at least when compared to the economic recessions of the 1980s) could thus explain the slight improvement in youth unemployment figures.

Periods of unemployment are increasingly normalised even for youth with good educational credentials (Lowe, 2001; Isengard, 2003). Tresize-Brown (2005) reports that full-time jobs for Australian teenagers and young adults have declined by 15.2 percent since 1995. Moreover, despite a series of reforms introduced to education and transition services throughout the 1990s, the proportion of Australian youth not in full-time education or work has not changed, remaining around 15 percent (Dusseldorp, 2005). The New Zealand context appears equally problematic, since in the face of a healthy economy and falling total unemployment rates youth unemployment remains disproportionately high. The most recent Household Labour Force Survey (June 2005) showed that the youth unemployment rate sits at just over 12 percent, or one in seven young people aged 15-19. The total unemployment rate,

however, is 3.7 percent, or one in 27 people. As Hutchinson (2003) argues, the benefits of a healthy economy are not being shared equally across all age groupings in society. During the period 1998-2003, the New Zealand economy created 165,000 new jobs. However, under 25s only took up 14 percent of these new jobs despite constituting 40 percent of the total unemployed population. Economic growth, Hutchinson (2003) argues, is a distant concern for those concerned with the social cost of unemployment.

Many commentators agree that one of the biggest problem facing OECD countries is long-term youth unemployment (OECD, 2002). Lynch (1999) writes that it is not so much joblessness itself that creates long-term problems, but rather, that the length of unemployment is critical. In general, research shows that the longer the spell of joblessness, the lower the re-employment probability. Most worrying is evidence that suggests that even if the majority of young people eventually settle into a relatively stable working life, there is a hard core of young people who consistently fall through the gaps, moving between precarious working situations and periods of unemployment for the remainder of their working lives. While several authors mention the well-established relationship between unemployment and mental health (Ryan, 1999; Strandh, 2000; Avison, 2001; McLaren, 2002), the adverse effects of unemployment can also include immediate and subsequent loss of personal well-being, damage to skills, motivation and confidence (Ryan, 1999). Unemployment in early life may thus cause lasting scarring while the demoralising effect of social exclusion from the adult world on young people's behaviour and attitudes runs the risk of permanently impairing their future employability (Barklamb, 2001; The Jobs Letter, 2002).

Finally, it is worth noting that neo-liberal economic ideology has also strongly filtered through into welfare legislation, which consequently impacts on many groups in society, including unemployed youth. To digress slightly for a minute, recent work by Giele and Holst (2004) describes how changing gender relations, in conjunction with neo-liberalism, have prompted a shift with regard to work and family policy. With regard to the upsurge in divorce, female-headed families and out-of-wedlock births for instance, Giele and Holst report that it is recognised that governments can no longer rely on the traditional family model to assure the basic economic welfare of its citizens. Governments throughout Europe and the United States increasingly attempt to eliminate barriers to women's work so that employment, rather than family allowances and welfare assistance, is the main source of income. The possible implications of this ideological shift for youth are considerable. Whereas in earlier decades, a certain degree of educational failure was considered a regrettable, yet inevitable, consequence of schooling (Skill New Zealand, 2000), countries are now measuring the impact of unemployment on economic growth and productivity primarily in terms of opportunity cost, both to individuals and nations (Barklamb, 2001; Dusseldorp, 2005). With concerns raised about the number of young people on welfare, a popular policy goal for youth is the fullest possible employment, or to put it in other words, 'zero waste' of young people (Hutchinson, 2003).

However, Isengard's (2003) comparison of youth unemployment in Britain and Germany demonstrates how neo-liberal labour market policy can have dire outcomes for young people. In Germany, a relatively high level of state regulation of the marketplace and a strong tradition of vocational education have generally aided the

school to work transition, whereas in Britain, a free market economy with low protection rights for employees means that the country has correspondingly higher rates of youth unemployment. Under a conservative welfare system in Germany, unemployment is considered an individual risk, and generous benefits are paid out of a statutory insurance system. The British welfare system, however, is based on the principle of poverty alleviation, and provides only enough for basic subsistence. As a consequence, there is considerable economic pressure in Britain for people to accept poorly paid jobs, which explains why researchers find high proportions of young people working in sub standard work, or 'McJobs'. What Isengard's research clearly shows is that all policy is located in a wider political arena through which individuals explore the possible pathways for their lives. However, because pathways, opportunities, and choices are not freely and equally available to all, policy thus has the potential to reinforce inequalities or reduce them.

Concluding Comments

While Goodwin and O'Connor's (2005) work on youth transitions in the 1960s in Leicester presents some challenge to the assumption that youth transitions in the 'golden age' of the post-war period were straightforward, linear and low-risk, the majority of commentators agree that labour market entry for young people has never been quite so complex and difficult as it is today. Young people are faced with a number of problematic tensions with regard to working life that they must attempt to negotiate in order to accomplish adulthood. Youth apparently enjoy a greater range of options in contemporary society, yet on the other hand, there is greater risk that they might make the wrong choice. Education promises a golden future for all, yet the current realities of the labour market, characterised by high youth unemployment, non-standard work and the need to constantly update skills, somewhat dampens the expectations that many young people hold about their future. Finally, the assumption that adulthood is a clear destination at which young people will arrive following the accomplishment of certain goals and behaviours deemed 'adult' (such as full-time employment and independent accommodation; see Riele, 2004) is undermined by the extended dependency that many youth now have on their parents and the education system. It might be more accurate to conceive of the contemporary young person as suspended within a phase of prolonged ambiguity: that of the no-longer-adolescent-but-not-quite-adult.

It seems clear that despite a range of attempts to address contemporary youth transition difficulties, current policy initiatives are, in the main, failing to make any real impact. The overemphasis on educational expansion is clearly creating problems for youth, if the research by Roberts (2004) is anything to go by. Evidently, as Gangl (2002) considers, the labour market supply and demand relationship is perhaps far more complex than policy makers assume. According to Buchmann (2002), the supply and demand of the labour market depends on three things: the institutional arrangements of the education system and labour market; the economic structures in place; and the economic conditions that are prevalent at the time (or in other words, individuals, firms and organisations, and institutions and labour market structures). In Buchmann's view, the problem of youth transitions needs to work at all three levels, and all three must be integrated. In this respect, it is critical for policy makers to grasp the complex interrelation between changes in education and employment systems in order to generate policy that might have a real chance of enacting a positive difference for youth. Moreover, as the discussion of disjunctures in policy demonstrated, policy makers need to pay more attention to the ideological underpinnings of the language used. As long as notions of linearity, individualism, choice and opportunity prevail, transitions to adulthood that diverge from this constructed norm will be considered atypical. In contrast, as this paper has argued, it is more likely that they reflect the complex and often troubled experiences of a generation.

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