A multi-dimensional perspective on young people's decisions not to go to university.

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*Abstract:* Despite the overwhelming focus on young people who are at either end of the educational or social spectrum in policy and research, vast numbers of young people do not reside at these extremes. Consequently, there have been calls to focus more closely on young people who reside in the 'middle.' This paper considers the utility of the concept of a 'middling' category through examining four selected case studies of young people as they anticipate their transition onto a range of post-18 education, training or employment pathways. It highlights the ways in which intra-class fractional positioning, academic attainment, personal biographies and serendipitous moments intersect and interact to frame young people's decisions about their post-18 pathways. Attention to these multidimensional elements, over a reliance on categories which position young people within sharp social or academic groups, is crucial for fully understanding young people's decisions.

*Introduction:*

In education policy, young people's post-18 transitions have traditionally been constructed through polarised categories. On the one hand, there has been an implicit preoccupation with bright, able or 'talented' young people from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These young people have been at the centre of widening participation policies which have ostensibly aimed to improve rates of participation in higher education (HE) amongst young people from non-traditional backgrounds (Sutton Trust 2020; HM

Government 2011; Welsh Government 2009). Contrasting this policy focus has been attention to those who finish their compulsory schooling with low or no qualifications and are considered ‘at risk’ of having no employment, education or training at the end of their school days (Welsh Government 2013a). For decades, these young people have been the targets of programmes designed to provide basic skills, work experience or vocational training (Russell et al. 2011; Roberts 2011).

In the face of deeply socially uneven patterns of participation in HE (Pring et al. 2009; Boliver 2013; Crawford 2014; Crawford and Greaves 2015) attention to these polarities is crucial for illuminating how classed inequalities and identities are reproduced in and through young people’s transitions from school onto a range of education, training and employment pathways and destinations. However, vast numbers of young people in the UK do not have the academic profiles which position them at the extremes of this stark dualism. Consequently, a growing body of research has attempted to provide a corrective to this through careful consideration of ‘ordinary’ or ‘middling’ young people (Roberts 2011; 2012; Roberts 2013; Connelly et al. 2013; Roberts and Macdonald 2013). Much of this research has revealed how the gradations and complexity of the class structure and educational attainments play out in the lives and opportunities of ‘ordinary’ young people (Roberts 2011; 2012), and has provided an important counterpoint to the relative neglect of the ‘middle’ within policy and research.

Echoing the focus on a ‘middling’ group of young people, this paper draws attention to four young people who neither were anticipating pathways to a degree at university nor were at ‘risk’ of becoming NEET (at least in terms of their immediate post-18 transitions). Instead, they were anticipating transitions onto a range of apprenticeships, training and employment pathways and destinations. Through attention to these four young people, the paper aims to understand why some young people decide to embark on ‘alternative’ post-18 pathways to those involving university, including vocational education and training or employment, despite being suitably qualified for HE.

*Identifying a ‘missing middle’ of young people*

Echoing this polarised discourse in policy, research on youth transitions, and on transitions to HE especially, has also tended to draw upon a ‘dualistic language’ (Roberts 2011) to

describe young people. Within the sociology of education, extensive and highly important research has attempted to understand the stubbornly uneven rates of university participation between young people from working-class and middle-class backgrounds (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Reay et al. 2001; Ball et al. 2002; Bathmaker et al. 2013). This research has revealed the ways in which young people's university choices are either constrained or enabled by material and social resources and capitals and psychological orientations towards HE which are heavily socially structured (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Reay et al. 2001; Ball et al. 2002). It has illustrated the 'qualitatively' different decisions about HE (including decisions about where to study) made by young people from different social class backgrounds (Reay et al. 2001).

Drawing out these polarities in social classed orientations to decision making and transitions to HE is, of course, important if policy makers are to address inequalities in access to educational opportunities (at post-16 and HE level) and unequal educational outcomes. Indeed, the gift of sociological analysis is its capacity to illuminate the patterning of access to educational opportunities, outcomes and destinations along gendered, racial and classed lines. However, representing young people through binary social-class terms (i.e. working and middle-class) or attainment lines (high or low achievers) fails to acknowledge the complexity and gradations of both the social class structure in society and young people's academic experiences and attainments (Connelley et al,. 2013). The class structure is deeply fractured (Savage et al. 2013), both in and between working and middle-class groups (Bernstein 1977; Power, Edwards, Whitty and Wigfall 2003; Savage et al. 2013). This fracturing is manifest both vertically (in terms of occupational groupings and volume of capital) and horizontally (Bourdieu 1984), demarcated by differences in the assets associated within occupational groups, fields of production or sector of employment (Bernstein 1977; Power 2000). This horizontal fracturing is also manifest in the composition of different forms of capital (economic, social and cultural) as illustrated in Savage et al's (2013) seven-class model which captures the gradations in the volume and forms of capital individuals have access to.

If identifying a 'middle' in terms of social positioning is problematic, then categorising the 'middle' in terms of academic attainment is equally challenging given the vast range of attainments young people can achieve (Connelly et al. 2013). Connelly et al. (2013) have

attempted to identify a ‘middle’ category of young people based on measures of academic attainment such as performance on statutory assessments (GCSES). However, they ultimately question the use of such stark categorisation in which a ‘middle’ group of young people can be clearly identified given the spectrum on which young people’s attainments fall.

Thus, just as a focus on young people at the polarities of the social or academic spectrum is problematic, so is identification of a group of young people who could be labelled as in the ‘middle’. My intention here, therefore, is not to replace one categorical grouping of young people (i.e. those at either end of the spectrum) with another (i.e. those in the middle). Whilst these young people might be located in the ‘middle’ in the sense that they were neither anticipating pathways to a degree at university nor were at ‘risk’ of becoming NEET, the analysis takes a three-dimensional perspective in which ‘class fractional positioning’, previous educational experiences and attainments and personal biographies are brought to the fore. This illuminates the ways in which decisions emerge from the relationship between ranging factors, contexts and circumstances which give rise to opportunities and constraints which frame young people’s decisions.

*Not going to university in contemporary times*

If young people’s decisions about their post-18 pathways are located on the intersection between multiple moments and circumstances, then also crucial to their decisions are the wider educational and economic landscapes in which their decisions are made. At present, HE policy and popular narratives surrounding HE are characterised by particular discourses underpinning the relationship between education and employment. Within these discourses HE and employment are tightly bound and participating in university is regarded as the means to economic success both for individuals and societies (BIS 2011; Welsh Government 2013b), as reflected in the narratives which emphasise HEs role in addressing social mobility agendas (BIS 2011; Welsh Government 2011). Consequently, going to university has been positioned in HE policy as the esteemed route to economic success, the default pathway of choice for young people able and willing to go (BIS 2011). Popular narratives have reflected these assumptions, constructing the university as the destination of choice for young people upon leaving school given the economic returns it is purported to bring (Sutton Trust 2020).

The implication embedded within such narratives is that non-HE pathways occupy a lower status option pursued by those less able or willing to participate in HE. Indeed, whilst vocational qualifications have been regarded as an important mechanism in government widening participation agendas (Bathmaker 2005) vocational non-HE routes are routinely imbued with deficit assumptions regarding their economic and educational value.

Yet as HE has expanded dramatically in recent decades the relationship between higher education qualifications (i.e. a degree) and employment has become less linear (Brown 2003; Brown, Lauder and Ashton 2011). In his critical assessment of this situation, Brown (2003; 2013) argues that the rhetoric of the knowledge economy, which has underpinned the justification for expansion over recent decades (particular in the 2000s under UK New Labour Governments), has led to an intensification of 'positional' conflict whereby higher education is sucking more and more people into already congested labour markets. If young people who are suitably qualified are increasingly expected to transition onto HE, how can their decisions to pursue 'alternatives' be understood, especially given that competition for labour market opportunities have become so intense? This research aims to explore this question. In doing so, it reveals how young people's decisions can only be fully grasped by taking a 'three-dimensional' approach which brings to the fore the myriad social, education and personal factors which frame and constrain their decisions. Such an approach enables us to witness the pragmatic, rational and also socially structured nature of their decisions.

*The study*

The data are drawn from a wider study (discussed in author, forthcoming) which aimed to explore the decision-making processes of young people who were not anticipating transitioning to an under-graduate degree at university. Ultimately, it aimed to understand why some young people decide to embark on alternative pathways. To this end, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 23 young people, aged 17-21, who were studying (full time) for Level 3 qualifications[1] in three different Further Education (FE) colleges in Wales between January to early May 2019. All of the young people were in the second year of their programmes of study and were due to finish in the summer of 2019. In total, 16 students were studying GCE

[1] Level three qualifications in the UK are typically studied at the post-16 stage and include academic and vocational qualifications such as A-levels and BTECS.

Advanced-level (A-level)[2] qualifications (in a range of subjects including history, law, religious studies, maths, business studies, Welsh, accountancy) and seven were studying for vocational Level three Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) qualifications (in subjects including Business, music and applied sciences).

The study's original intentions were to examine the decision making processes of young people who might be considered 'in the middle' in terms of their academic attainment. Consequently, although a small number of the young people had very strong GCSEs and were on track for exclusively A*/As at A-levels, on the whole they were not academic 'high flyers' for whom the transition to university was set in motion by their previous academic achievements. Academically, they would largely be counted as 'in the middle' according to Connelly's et al's (2013) attempt to define a 'middle' (that is, at least 1-4 GCSE A*-C grades). They were largely on track for Cs or D in their A-levels, though some were expecting Bs and a few As. Those pursuing vocational qualifications were largely on track for either merits or distinctions. Crucially, all of these young people had qualifications which would make the transition to HE perfectly possible, albeit, their options limited to certain courses and institutions within a highly stratified HE sector (Boliver 2015). Yet none of them anticipated progressing onto university and so had not, at the time of the interview, applied to university[3]. For these young people, entry to many high ranking and research intensive universities which tend to have high average entry UCAS tariff point scores[4], may have been off limits given their predicted grades. However, there are a substantial number of universities with lower average entry requirements which the students in this research would have gained access to (see The Complete University Guide 2020 for details). Interviews were conducted in locations on each of the three college campuses and lasted between 15-40 minutes. Each interview was recorded using a digital voice recorder and audio recordings were transcribed by a professional UK transcription company.

Reflecting the increasingly fractured nature of the class structure (Roberts 2011; Savage et al. 2013), the young people in this study were, on the whole, from backgrounds that could

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[2] Two of the A-level students were studying for a combination of A-levels and vocational qualifications.
[3] This is with the exception of one student, Toby, who was going to embark on a Degree Apprenticeship at a university in England in Sept 2019.
[4] UCAS is the University and Colleges Admissions Service and is the main body for processing applications to HE courses in the UK.

neither be characterised as distinctly working or middle-class. Instead, many would fall into some of the ‘middling’ categories in Savage et al’s (2013) seven-category model of social class. Four had at least one parent with professional or managerial employment (as teachers, business owners and directors or managers of small businesses) which would place them as ’established middle class’ according to Savage et al’s (2013) model. 14 had parents whose employment would place them in either the ‘technical middle-class’ or ‘new affluent workers’ as they had occupations such as teaching assistants, childminders, secretaries receptionist, paramedics, managers of small departments, council workers and three would be described as having ‘traditional working class’ occupations having jobs as care workers or security guides. For the majority of the students (16), both parents or step-parents were employed; four had one parent in work, another student lived only with her father who was employed and one student lived only with her mother who was currently ‘off sick’ from work. The majority of these young people’s parents did not have experience of HE (14), a minority (five) had both parents with a degree and four had one parent with a degree. None of the students’ parents had post-graduate qualifications.

A range of theoretical resources were used to guide the analysis. Work which has illuminated the social structuring of decisions was deployed to examine the ways in which intra-class fractions and the material, social and cultural resources made available to young people by their cultural and social situations orientate them differently to a range of post-18 options (Ball et al. 2000). The analysis also borrows concepts from Hodkinson and Sparkes’s (1997) study of careership in which they highlight the objective and subjective dimension of opportunities. Thus, whilst opportunities are systematically structured, young people are nonetheless able to choose between options according to their personal preferences, hopes and aspirations. Here, serendipitous moments in young people’s lives (Atkins 2017; Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997) and the intricacies of their personal biographical situations as well as their hopes and preferences about the experiences they want and the types of futures they long for (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Ball et al. 2000) are also crucial. How these myriad features come to intersect to bear on decisions was an important focus of the analysis.

*The four young people.*

In this paper, I centre four young people and consider the decision making processes which underpinned their anticipated transitions onto a range of training and employment pathways. These participants have been selected, not because they are remarkable or extra-ordinary but because their narratives reveal the way in which decisions are located on the intersection of multiple and complex social, personal and educational circumstances. This means that whilst some of these young people, like Rosie, had very high levels of attainment, when a three-dimensional perspective is taken which accounts for her social positioning (including her parents' occupations and HE experiences), her biographical circumstances and a range of personal preferences, we gainer greater clarity on how her decisions were formed. What's more, whilst these four young people were uniquely placed in terms of their positions on an attainment continuum (Connelly et al. 2013), their narratives reach out and speak to processes - personal, social and cultural- that affected the research cohort as a whole.

The four case study young people:

| **Participant** | **Level 3 qualifications studying at time of research** | **Academic attainment.** | **Fractional class positioning** | **Parental experience of HE?** | **Post-18 plans** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Rosie | Business studies, Law and Accounting A-levels and ATT | High academic achievement (predicted As in A-level and merit in ATT) | New affluent worker | Yes- father | Apprenticeship |

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Jack | Business studies and Accounting A-levels and ATT | Moderate to good (predicted 2 Bs in A-levels and merit in ATT) | New affluent worker | None | Apprenticeship |
| Rachel | Maths and ICT A-levels | Moderate to good attainment: On track for a B in both A-levels. | Technical middle-class | Yes- both parents | Employment or apprenticeship |
| Oliver | Business studies level 3, BTEC | Low to moderate- On track for merits in BTEC | Established middle-class | Yes- both parents | Employment or continue own business. |

*Rosie*[5]

Rosie was studying A-levels in Business studies, law and accounting as well as the Association of Taxation Technicians (AAT) qualification which is a vocational accountancy qualification at a large FE college (Littleton College) in South Wales. Her father had been a police officer before taking medical retirement following an accident and her mother worked part-time as a retail assistant at a supermarket. He had gained a degree whilst he'd been in the army as a mature student, and her mother had no experience of HE. Rosie was an extremely high attaining student and was predicted A grades in her A-levels and a merit

[5] Pseudonyms are used for people and places throughout.

in her ATT exam. She exuded confidence in relation to her academic abilities and expressed enjoyment for accountancy, maths and learning more generally. She explained how she had '*always wanted a maths-based career*' and when she discovered that she could do an accountancy A-level at college she was delighted; *'I didn't realise that was an option. I started it and absolutely loved it. I knew that was my career path*'. Rosie's strong academic track record underpinned her highly positive 'learning identity' (Rees et al. 1997) and presented university as both an objective and subjective opportunity for her. She described how she had always thought university would be the next step for her after college. However, a range of circumstances prompted her to change her views on this, and at the time of her interview she has been accepted on to an Accountancy Apprenticeship which would begin in the following September. Her college provided support for students anticipating alternative pathways from those involving a degree, including open evenings advertising apprenticeships. Indeed, Rosie had attended an 'accountancy' open evening at her college earlier in the year and this had, in her terms, played a significant role in changing her mind about going to university:

> Well, the college held an accounting open evening last year, early on…I always thought I had to go to university, and they showed us all the options we could go down.

Rosie's decision to apply for an apprenticeship rather than university was not only informed by this serendipitous moment (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997; Atkins 2017;) but by wider social experiences of HE which underpin her 'preference structure' in relation to university (Rees et al. 1997). Whilst her father's experience of HE as a mature student provided her with some cultural knowledge and information about university, Rosie was not deeply embedded in HE (Ball et al. 2002) and thus opting for alternatives did not constitute an 'against the grain' decision in relation to family experiences.

Other biographical factors framed this decision; Rosie was 21 and for her, opportunity to both earn and learn were really important considerations driving her decision to pursue the apprenticeship route rather than embark on university:

> Also, with my age, I'm 21, I don't want to be spending three years away from work, because I'd be 24 when I graduated, and it's not what I wanted… Well, that was the

> first time I'd heard about doing an apprenticeship, and that was, straight away, I never looked back…

Rosie's decision to pursue an apprenticeship and her rejection of university is then, informed by a complex relationship between her previous educational experiences and attainments which define the set of objective opportunities (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997), the cultural and educational resources on which she can draw and her personal circumstances (her age). Concern over the financial costs of university (at the time, tuition fees were roughly £9,000 a year for undergraduate programmes in England and Wales) further consolidates her decision to pursue an apprenticeship rather than a degree. Her desire to earn a living is 'pragmatically rational' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997); she sees it as the better option because it provides her with an opportunity to gain experience and an income without huge financial costs.

In Rosie's narrative both the subjective and objective dimensions of opportunity are visible (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997); going to university was an option given her strong academic profile but it wasn't the only option. She is able to conceive of alternative options and anticipate embarking on them with a considerable degree of certainty. In some ways, Rosie's options were broader than they are for young people who are more deeply embedded in 'cultural scripts' regarding university which make particular options thinkable and others unimaginable (Reay et al. 2001; Ball et al. 2002). Because of her strong academic profile, Rosie is able to engage in 'deliberate-decision making' and choose between the more traditional degree (which is routinely the only acceptable form of HE for the children of many middle-class parents) (Reay et al,. 2001) and an apprenticeship.

This is not to suggest that Rosie's options were not limited or constrained in any way. Certainly, her decision to pursue an apprenticeship is in keeping with 'non-traditional' HE students' orientations towards HE. However, such interpretation would overlook the complexity of this situation and the ways in which her decisions emerged from the interactions between her cultural and social contexts and a range of biographical contexts and preferences. Thus, whilst Rosie's 'horizons for action' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997) were broad, enabled by her high academic achievement which made university a highly possible and attainable option, they were also shaped in a relationship between her

personal biography and the structure of presuppositions (Rees et al. 1997) which defined the range of objective and subjective opportunities available to her.

*Jack*

Like Rosie, Jack attended Littleton FE college in South Wales and was anticipating progression onto an apprenticeship once he finished his A-levels in Business and Accounts and ATT level 3 which he was currently studying. Jack's mother doesn't work accept for sporadic hairdressing work and his father works for an insurance company. Neither of Jack's parents went to university and the only person he can recall in his family with university experience is his aunty. His previous academic attainment was relatively strong (he had achieved all Cs and above in his GCSEs, with mostly Cs and some Bs and an A) and he was on track for Bs in his A-levels and a merit in his ATT qualification. Despite this, he had doubts over whether universities take applicants with lower grades:

> I was always under the impression that, for uni, you've got to get super high grades, like AA… I know it's not the case now, some places take Bs and stuff and some Cs. I could do that, but I didn't think that I'd be the person that gets As. Obviously, I'd do my best and see what happens, but lack of confidence there, I suppose. So, yes, I thought as well, an apprenticeship is more for me because I know that I didn't think I'd get, you know, 3 As.

There are a number of considerations underpinning Jack's decision to pursue the apprenticeship route. Jack does not so much as reject university as an option, rather, it didn't feature significantly within his thinking about his post-18 options in the first place. His family provided little in the way of resources of knowledge and information which would support his transition onto university. Not going to university was part of a 'normal biography' (Du Bois-Reymond 1998) and therefore pursuing alternative options seemed obvious. His decision was compounded by his lack of confidence regarding his academic attainment and his ambivalence about how he would get on in university if he were to go. Whilst both Rosie and Jack had fairly similar cultural orientations toward HE, neither being highly embedded in it (although Rosie's father's experience of HE as a mature student provided her with some knowledge about it), they had quite different orientations towards HE because their academic attainment and 'learner identities' were so vastly different.

Whilst Rosie's high academic attainment had set her on a pathway to university (an option which she ultimately rejects), Jack's previous academic experiences combined with the limited family experience of HE meant that university doesn't appear (subjectively) as an option for him:

> I think that's always been something that… since I came to college, I thought, "I don't think I'm going to go to uni." So, for the past two years, I've been thinking of getting an apprenticeship.

Jack's decision to embark on the apprenticeship rather than university may reflect wider discourses in which university is regarded as the route of choice for high achieving young people. Whilst Jack's grades would surely enable him to gain entry to many universities, albeit to lower UCAS tariff universities, he may be rejecting the kinds of universities he could possibly gain entry to. This echoes work which has found similar rejection of such universities (Hutchings and Archer 2001) amongst those from non-traditional backgrounds who tend to be overrepresented in post-92 institutions (Boliver 2013). Also important in Jack's decisions are his hopes and preferences about the kind of future he wants. He talks extensively about wanting to start earning a living, a major appeal of the apprenticeship, without the huge financial cost that a university degree would entail. It may be that for Jack, without parental experience of HE to draw upon, university is regarded with a sense of caution and may even be viewed as an indulgence and a delay to the transition to adulthood and the responsibilities of work that taking on an apprenticeship would offer. He explains:

> I'd rather just jump straight into the real world, earn as well, get experience, so, yes….I think it's that I'd like to get into the adult world, the working life and make some money, get experience, better future and so on.

For Jack, taking on an apprenticeship seems like the best option, despite a degree being (at least objectively) perfectly possible for him. Thus, like Rosie, his decisions are 'pragmatically rational' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997) whereby the utility of the degree is questioned whilst the apprenticeship is regarded with high esteem because it provides the direct route into a sought after career. Yet these decisions are set within externally framed boundaries (Rees et al. 1997) which define what is possible and attainable. Given his ambivalences and

fears about going to university and the relative value he attaches to an apprenticeship, it is perhaps not surprising that university was never seriously considered.

*Rachel*

Rachel was studying A-levels in maths and ICT as well as the Welsh Baccalaureate at Shorebroke FE College in South Wales. She was on track for Bs in both of her A-levels and had mostly As, Bs and Cs in her GCSEs. Both her parents were graduates (albeit her father gained his degree as a mature student when Rachel was a baby) and both of her older siblings had been to university. Her mother worked as a receptionist for a local housing association whilst her father worked in governance and often worked abroad. Rachel's parents' experience of higher education not only provided her with knowledge and information about university which she could draw upon if she wished to, but also a 'structure of presuppositions' (Rees et al. 1997, p488) regarding what options she had on completion of her college course. Yet Rachel was certain that she did not want to go to university and had not made an application through UCAS. At the time of her interview, she has tentative ideas about beginning a training course or finding a job after leaving college. Whilst Rachel had a relatively strong academic record, she had an ambivalent 'learning identity' (Rees et al. 1997; author forthcoming) and this hung heavy over her feelings about going to university and informed her decision about applying. She described her exasperation towards the dominance of exams as a method of measuring knowledge and understanding within formal education and this appears to bear on her decision not to apply to university:

> I thought from the beginning, from before starting my A Levels, I didn't really want to go to university. It wasn't really something that I'd thought of going to. Because, like I was saying, the way we've been doing education so far, I don't feel that's the best for me of showing that I can understand things. I feel I don't do well with how education would be in university, so I work better in a different kind of way.

Apparent in Rachel's quote is her assessment of how she best learns, which she feels is incompatible with a university environment. Thus, whilst she is not clear about the content of her prospective training route, she knows what form of pedagogy works well for her, and is it a type of pedagogy she feels university would not offer her. Also important in Rachel's

decision was her desire to gain ‘life and work experience’ which she feels would be provided through embarking on paid work following college. She is sceptical about the purpose of university, perceiving it as being valuable for some careers (in areas such as medicine or law) but of limited value for other careers and employment. Yet, whilst she is certain that she didn’t want to go to university, she is quite uncertain about what she would do instead, other than to gain a job and work experience or training (perhaps, tentatively in ICT). Thus, whilst Rachel’s parents might have been able to provide her with forms of knowledge and information that would have aided her entry to HE, their capacity to support her in making transitions to alternative routes was far more limited. Indeed, she recalls their trepidation about her decision not to apply to university.

> They [her parents] don’t really understand that I don’t want to do anything. I was like, “I want to take a bit of a break from education,” type thing. And my mum was like, “Oh, you have that over the summer and then you can do something.”…So they worry about what I’m going to be doing instead.

If going to university is part of a ‘normal biography’ for Rachel, then her decision not to apply was demonstrably ‘against the grain’. Despite being provided with a set of socially structured preferences (Rees et al. 1997, p488) about university which restrict the range of subjective options presented to her, she is still able to ‘reject’ these options. Yet doing so has implications for her options. The limited support she apparently receives from her family in pursuing alternatives is manifest in her lack of clarity about what she could do instead. This may reflect the way in which university routes are presented as the esteemed option to which all young people who are academically able *should* make the transition in popular discourse. As Rachel is relatively academically successful, not going to university is not presented a legitimate option for her, reflecting this wider societal discourse. What’s more, given that university was more strongly part of a family cultural ‘script’ for Rachel, diverging from this proved challenging.

*Oliver*

Oliver was undertaking a BTEC in Business Studies level 3 at Woodburn FE College in South Wales and was on track for a merit. Amongst all the college students who took part in the study, Oliver came from the most socio-economically privileged background and was the most distinctively 'middle-class.' Both his parents had a university degree and his mother was a landlady and his father a CEO of a number of businesses and an investor. He was the only person in the sample to have been privately educated throughout the whole of his nursery, primary and secondary schooling. Though Oliver might not be described as in the 'middle' given his privileged background, drawing attention to his experiences and the decisions he makes illuminates the intersecting and interacting moments between his social classed positioning, previous educational experiences and a range of personal circumstances.

Oliver had moved from private school to FE college following the completion of his GCSEs because his academic performance was not strong enough for him to gain entry to the highly selective school 6th form attached to his school. Although he passed all but one of his GCSES, he explained that he found the academic side of education more of a 'challenge' than the practical. This had a strong bearing on his decision to pursue a BTEC rather than A-levels which he felt would suit his preference for practical rather than academic study. Oliver also described himself as dyslexic, dyscalculic and dyspraxic and these seem to have borne heavily on his experiences of school and subsequent choices. Oliver's 'learning identity' was not so much 'fragile' (Ball et al. 2000) as deeply embedded in the practical and vocational elements of education and work and this was reflected in his activities outside of college. In addition to pursuing his college course, Oliver worked for an IT firm as a 'technology consultant' and was CEO for his own business which he set up at age 15. Running his business seemed to take up a large part of his time and his commitment to this was clear. Whilst Oliver's academic identity was ambivalent, the confidence, adeptness and ease with which he spoke about his business and the business and technology world more generally was striking. His interview was peppered with business jargon as he made reference to his 'clients', 'networks', 'business relationships' and the money he could make in an hour from his business.

His interest in business and technology, and his 'learner identity' informed his decision about both his immediate and longer term future. Oliver was deciding between either going

back to college next year to pursue an extended Diploma in Business, or take on more hours in his job with the IT firm, which would allow him more time to spend on his business. He was leaning towards the latter as he was sceptical about what he could gain from college and felt that working and developing his business might be more economically beneficial. Indeed, his doubts about what he might gain from further study also informed his decision about applying to university. He felt that university might not provide him with any additional academic or technical knowledge and skills, or social capital, that he would not be able to gain from work. He was also fearful that time away from work whilst at university would hamper his skills in technology. His decision not to apply was thus heavily rooted in economic considerations of costs and benefits:

> … it sounds really bad, but I like to see money for my work. And when I've got the option to work and have money coming in, it's one of those decisions where if I'm studying for an exam or something like that, that's my time off another project where I could be earning money. And in my brain it's going, "Well, you could be earning more money, Oliver." Or, "You're not using your time right." So, it's one of those decisions I've got to weigh up of, if I study, I know it takes additional hours and not just whilst you're in a lecture or something.

His explanation for not applying to university was thus both economically and pragmatically rational (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) (though not necessarily informed by actual cost-reward calculations in which the 'real' economic benefits of HE are fully known). His decisions were also framed by his previous academic experiences, attainments and 'learning identities' and access to social and cultural resources, all of which defined the scope of 'actually available opportunities' (Rees et al. 1997). Oliver had access to cultural resources which might support his transition to HE, but the range of universities and courses he could apply to were curtailed by his difficulties with academic study and his previous academic attainments. Nevertheless, his options are vastly more expansive than the opportunities faced by many young people leaving school with similar academic attainments from less privileged backgrounds. Rather than anticipating low skilled and waged employment, Oliver was anticipating a highly rewarding and lucrative option (in the form of running his own business and gaining, according to him, quite substantial income from it). This meant that the 'alternative' options presented to him were quite lucrative both in economic and social

terms. For example, he was able to draw upon his father's business knowledge to help establish his own business:

> Because of my dad's business knowledge and with him running his own businesses, he obviously sort of helped in just the registering it part. But from there I've done everything else.

Whilst not going to university was 'against the grain' given the experiences of HE within his family, other options had become perfectly possible given the cultural and social resources he had at his disposal (e.g., using some of his fathers' contacts to make initial business contacts). Oliver's decisions about his post-18 pathways are thus the product of intricate relationships between class position, previous academic attainment, preference, plans and dreams which both open up and close down opportunities.

*Intersections and interactions of the personal and social in the making of 'alternative' decisions.*

What can be made of the four case studies presented here? At one level, these case studies problematise deficit assumptions underpinning non-HE participation in which not going to university is regarded as both the lower status and 'forced choice' alternative in comparison to HE participation. Such narratives posit that HE is the pathway that high achieving school and college students ought to take and has therefore become regarded as the default option for these young people in recent years. However, these young people's narratives powerfully question such deficit assumptions as they revealed that non-HE is often a positive and pragmatically rational decision. For these college students, alternative routes (such as apprenticeships) were regarded as having distinct value and utility in helping them achieve their employment goals, particularly in relation to their views on how they best learn and their preferences for vocational over academic modes of learning. Thus, not going to university is not a reflection of lack of 'talent' or cultural familiarity (as popular narratives and some sociological accounts would suggest). Rather it often reflects a positive and active choice, perhaps especially so in a context in which graduate premium is uneven (Britton et al. 2016) and graduate labour markets highly competitive and congested (Brown et al. 2011).

That young people make active choices does not, however, negate the powerful ways in which their decisions not to embark on university are set within a relationship between intersecting and interacting elements of fractional social position, previous academic attainment and educational experiences. In this sense then, their decisions are bounded by objective and subjective opportunities, the parameters of which are externally constituted (Rees et al. 1997). Whilst young people are presented with sets of opportunities, defined by 'externally constituted' parameters, they are still able to choose between alternatives. The decisions they make are informed by individual preferences and biographical contexts and past experiences of education and attainments which inform how they view the 'process of learning' (Rees et al. 1997). However, their capacity to reject particular options and to anticipate alternatives with any confidence is determined by their personal circumstances as well as the social and material resources to which they have access. It is in the context of these young people's decisions about their future education and training pathways that we begin to witness the structuring of opportunity and life chances.

Certainly, the narratives presented here are of four unique individuals, yet their decisions reveal the centrality of social structures and the ways they intersect with their past educational attainments and experiences in framing their decisions. For example, in Oliver's account, we witnessed the ways in which alternative options are opened up as product of the social, cultural and economic capitals he was able to draw upon. These appeared to buffer any negative repercussions of his less than positive learning identity and weaker academic profile. By contrast, Rosie's very strong academic profile meant that HE and a range of alternatives (including the apprenticeship) were possible options for her. Although she ultimately decided against university in favour of an apprenticeship, she was surely making deliberate and 'pragmatic' decisions which were not curtailed by cultural expectations around university.  In this sense then, her subjective and objective opportunities were broader than Rachel and Jacks, whose ambivalent views on formal education (and hence university) and uncertainty about their own academic abilities rendered HE a less attractive option. For Rachel, despite being presented with a set of 'taken for granted presuppositions' (Rees et al. 1997) regarding university, she anticipates taking an alternative pathway. But doing so has less productive ends for her than it does for Oliver, whose privileged circumstances allow alternative options to be taken. This is in

contrast with Jack, whose educational inheritances (Ball et al. 2000) do not orientate him so closely with HE which means that 'alternative' option are more vividly imagined than they are for Rachel.

These case studies have provided insight into the ways in which prior attainment and educational experiences are never enacted straightforwardly on young people's decisions about their education, training and employment. There is no direct matching of prior academic performance and qualifications with choices (Ball et al. 2002). Decisions are always and inevitably mediated by personal, social, cultural and economic circumstances and contingencies. Hence, as critical scholars such as Rose (1989) have argued, people 'choose' but not always in conditions of their own making. Their decisions are located within the boundaries of opportunities which have been externally defined. In order to fully address social inequalities in participation in various education and training pathways, it is essential that we thoroughly grasp of the ways in which young people's social positioning and their academic attainments and past educational experiences (which of course, are not unrelated) so powerfully frame their decisions and future transitions. A multi-dimensional perspective, in which the intersections of these elements are brought sharply into focus, is essential here.

*Concluding remarks: Is the 'middle' a useful concept?*

I began this paper by considering the rightful critique of the dualistic discourse which has permeated youth transitions research and the laudable attempt to address this through studies which focus on the 'missing middle'. Now I want to consider the extent to which the 'middle' is a useful concept for describing the decisions and anticipated transitions of young people on the brink of transitioning from post-18 education to alternative (that is, non-university) pathways.

The narratives of these young people suggest that a more valuable perspective to one which focuses on the 'middle' is to take a multidimensional approach in which the interactions of social class fractional positioning, past educational experience and attainments and learning identities are brought to focus. As these case studies have revealed, these multiple elements intersect and interact to inform the scope of opportunities available to young people. High achievement can collide with fractional social positioning (including parental

experiences of HE which provide sets of resources for making decisions about HE) providing young people with a set of opportunities and constraints which were quite different from a young person with lower attainments and ambivalent learning identities. It is precisely through examining the intersections of these young people's class background with their educational experiences that we can understand how social inequalities are reproduced in and through the decisions and transitions they make.

The 'middle' cannot then be defined with reference to one dimension alone; it is neither purely socially or academically constituted. As illustrated here, young people who reside in privileged middle-class locations, may find themselves as distinctly middling given their academic profiles and personal biographies, as Rachel and Oliver did so. By the same measure, those who have high academic attainments (like Rosie and to some extent Jack) from 'less privileged backgrounds', might not have the kinds of educational inheritances to support their transitions to university. Focusing on the 'middle' or for that matter, young people at the extremes of any social or academic spectrum, may run the risk of overlooking or obfuscating the intricacy with which personal, social and academic circumstances intersect in young people's decisions, and of falling into the very 'categorising' trap we studiously sought to avoid.

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