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Pinball transitions: exploring the school-to-work transitions of 'the missing middle'

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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to the call for more research on the 'missing middle' by reporting the findings of a small-scale qualitative longitudinal study in the North of England exploring the labour market transitions of young people completing compulsory schooling with mid-level qualifications and seeking employment. It found that participants desired training which aligned with their skills, interests and future work intentions. Participants were drawn to seek apprenticeships because they offered 'earning and learning' in a real-life work environment. However, for the vast majority, apprenticeships were not available, so they turned to college to articulate their choices and gain work-related training. Qualifications were gained in order to gain leverage in the job market and help them achieve 'getting on' work. However, often a period of 'pinballing' between their ambitions and the reality of the labour market ensued due to the lack of desirable quality work available. The majority of participants were still resisting 'going nowhere' work and making efforts to achieve 'getting on' work when interviewed, however, some had stopped making the effort and resigned themselves to on-going poor quality work. The process of biographicity was, for them, a reconciliation with on-going low-quality work.

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Youth; transitions; missing-middle; quality of work; biographicity; pinball

Introduction

This paper reports the key findings of a small-scale qualitative longitudinal study exploring the labour market transitions of 37 young people completing compulsory schooling with mid-level qualifications (level 2 or level 3 qualifications, see methodology) and seeking employment in the North of England. The research represents a direct response to repeated calls over the last decade within the youth studies literature for more research on what Roberts (2011) has termed 'the missing middle' (see MacDonald 2011; Roberts 2013; Irwin 2020). The neglect of 'middle' or 'ordinary' young people's school-to-work transitions has been a long-standing issue within the youth studies literature (Brown 1987; Roberts 2011) that has been exacerbated by changes in the youth labour market that have tended to focus attention on the increasing vulnerability of youth to

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unemployment, precarious work, low pay and – particularly in the aftermath of the Great Recession – the rising number of young people not in employment, education or training and thereby classified as NEET and deemed at high risk of socio-economic exclusion (Scandurra, Cefalo, and Kasepov 2021; Cuzzocrea 2020; Irwin 2020). Such 'difficult' or 'unsuccessful' transitions (DfE 2020) are often compared and contrasted with the experiences of the increasing number of young people taking the 'optimal route' of attending university, in the attempt to identify the key factors or characteristics associated with both successful and unsuccessful transitions from education to work (Dickerson, Morris, and McDool 2020; DfE 2020). However, this tendency to focus on polarised youth transitions at the top and bottom has rendered the experiences of a significant proportion of young people – the 40–50% who neither attend HE nor end up as NEET (Irwin 2020) – invisible and unproblematic. A range of research suggests that young people leaving compulsory education with mid-level qualifications and seeking employment in contemporary labour markets are being squeezed from a variety of directions and are channelling into a polarised occupational structure – putting them at much greater risk of a range of undesired labour market statuses and outcomes than previous generations (Irwin 2020; Scandurra, Cefalo, and Kasepov 2021).

Following Irwin (2020) our broad aim in this paper is to 'hold a mirror to experiences in the middle' and in so doing, provide a more extensive analysis of the processes that frame young people's trajectories and experiences from compulsory schooling and into the labour market. More specifically, we are interested in exploring our sample's aspirations on leaving school and their experiences in seeking to achieve these aspirations in the labour market. The qualitative longitudinal method deployed allowed us to capture how aspirations, motivations and intentions changed over time in relation to young people's experiences in employment and training. Finally, in order to critically interrogate assumptions around what constitutes a successful transition into employment, we reflect on young people's own perceptions of their transition experiences.

Conceptualising school-to-work transitions

A re-occurring criticism of the school-to-work transition literature has been the tendency to focus on the experiences of the minority of youth at the top and bottom of both school and labour market hierarchies – 'high-flyers and rebels' (Brown 1987, 3) – whilst neglecting the more mundane, less spectacular experiences of the majority (Brown 1987; Roberts 2011, 2018). One of the earliest proponents of this view, Brown (1987), argued that dominant theories of working-class school experience often posited a bi-polar model distinguishing between those who conformed to the school culture and those who rejected it – 'Ear'oles' and 'Lads' in the vernacular of Willis' (1977) participants and 'Swots' and 'Rems' in Brown's (1987).

However, for Brown (1987), only a minority of working-class youth demonstrated the normative or normative instrumental orientation to school of the 'swots', who envisioned a future in higher education and tried extremely hard in school to achieve their aim of 'getting out' of the working-class. Equally, only a small minority of working-class youth displayed the 'alienated' orientation of the 'Rems' or 'Lads' and rejected school, in their desire to 'get in' to the labour market as quickly as possible. As compelling as these conceptualisations were, for Brown (1987, 1) they rendered invisible the experiences of the

majority – 'ordinary' working-class pupils who neither 'left their names engraved on the school's honours boards nor gouged them into the top of classroom desks'. It is worth briefly re-calling Brown's theorising of the education and work orientations of 'ordinary kids' here, as they may continue to have resonance in understanding the orientations and experiences of the participants in this study, as they have in other studies exploring the 'missing middle' (Roberts 2018).

Brown (1987) argued that 'ordinary kids' displayed an 'alienated Instrumental' orientation to education, viewing it primarily in terms of its usefulness in helping them 'get on' into decent working-class employment. Crucially, such work was fundamental to the achievement of a dignified life and respect within the wider community. The identities of ordinary kids partly reflected their educational attainment, but also moral evaluations of themselves and other groups. Thus, if 'swots' worked too hard and 'rems' too little, making some effort in working for qualifications was seen by 'ordinary kids' as symbolic of social and moral worth, and crucial to their central ambition of 'getting on' into decent work that provided meaning, dignity and respect.

The context of Brown's (1987) study was the collapse of the youth labour market – the percentage of 16 year olds in employment declined from 60% in 1974 to 18% in 1984 – the rise of mass youth unemployment and declining opportunities to 'get on' into decent working-class jobs. Thus, the vast majority of 'ordinary kids' were not in the jobs they wanted 18 months later. Brown (1987, 137) suggested that such conditions might sever the link between making an effort to achieve educational qualifications and gaining entry to decent work, thereby potentially fatally undermining the key tenets of the 'ordinary kids' frame of reference.

In the decades following Brown's work, the idea that school-to-work transitions can be understood in polarising terms has persisted. Thus, in summarising the findings of a programme of work involving over 18 separate studies into youth transitions in the late 1990s, Jones (2002, 1–2) argued in *the Youth Divide*, that young people were 'more and more sharply divided' and that there was evidence of 'polarisation of experience in every aspect of the transition to adulthood'.

Jones (2002) differentiates between traditionally working-class 'fast-track' transitions from school to the labour market and traditionally middle-class 'slow-track' transitions through Higher Education and into higher-level professional and managerial occupations. Jones (2002) suggests there are now few real alternatives to educational success and thus increasing numbers of working-class young people are on the 'slow-track'. However, this has led to an oversupply of the well-qualified, increased competition for graduate jobs and higher rates of graduate unemployment. As a consequence, there is increased 'bumping down' in the occupational structure as graduates are recruited to non-graduate jobs displacing and disadvantaging young people with non-graduate qualifications (Holmes and Mayhew 2015; Irwin 2020).

For those on fast-track transitions, there is little doubt that labour market conditions have significantly worsened. Those who seek to enter the labour market after completing compulsory education appear particularly disadvantaged and are more likely to experience unemployment, homelessness and poverty and fall into the category of NEET (MacDonald 2011). Recent research on young people in the labour market suggests that they are concentrated in 'sticky' low-paying jobs such that most young people in low-paying work in 2002 were still low paid a decade later (Resolution Foundation 2013). One-third of

young people report that they receive no training at all in their current employment, with that figure rising to 40% for those working in retail. Lack of access to opportunities for skill development and quality training means entry-level jobs often do not act as stepping-stones into higher quality work for many young people, instead functioning as 'dead-end' jobs (TUC 2018).

For McDowell (2012), the abundance of 'precarious work' – particularly the prevalence of 'flexible' or non-standard employment contracts that fail to provide opportunities for progression or stability in terms of hours and pay – is the key issue facing young workers in contemporary labour markets. Thus, for school or college (vocational education available in the compulsory education period of sixteen to eighteen years old) leavers, finding a job that allows you 'get on' in Brown's (1987) terms – that is a job that is secure with prospects that provides meaning or satisfaction – is of upmost importance, yet increasingly challenging (Irwin 2020).

Indeed, for the most disadvantaged youth, 'fast-track' may be somewhat of a misnomer, given the prevalence of 'the low-pay/no pay cycle' and the common experience of 'churning' between low-quality jobs, low-quality training and unemployment (Shildrick et al. 2012). Thus, while HE qualifications remain the key route into high-quality occupations, for MacDonald (2011) and McDowell (2012) underemployment is increasingly apparent, even within graduate transitions, and is a pervasive characteristic of the labour market transitions of working-class youth.

In an attempt to conceptualise these shifts in school-to-work transitions, Walther and Plug (2006) describe the growth of 'yo-yo' transitions characterised by non-linear movements back and forth through various educational and employment statuses. For Cuzzocrea (2020), the yo-yo metaphor highlights work can no longer be seen as a destination or an arrival point as for many young people it is a space marked by uncertainty, precarity and ambivalence. In such a context, Cuzzocrea (2020) advances the concept of 'pinball youth' in order to better capture the intensification of mobility created by increasing uncertainty and precarity in youth labour markets. The pinball metaphor seeks to highlight the staccato nature of labour market transitions whereby young people frequently move between different employment and training statuses, continually stopping and starting, struggling to obtain cumulative gains and attain their goals. Whilst the pinball metaphor seeks to capture young people's agency – particularly the effort they expand in struggling to overcome the obstacles they face in seeking to achieve their goals – it also strongly focuses attention on their lack of agency in controlling their work path.

Schoon and Lyons-Amos (2016), however, see young people's agency as less – bounded and place significantly more emphasis on the importance of their choices:

> Transition to adulthood requires active decision-making and choice within structural constraints. Well-formulated goals, and a good sense of one's capabilities and potential enable the person to envisage future "possible selves", and plan strategies to attain them.

Young people's capacity to assign and achieve goals and thereby meaningful influence their labour market outcomes may be described as their 'biographicity' – defined as the capacity to work on the self, navigate uncertain life course transitions and reconcile subjective aspirations with structural constraints (Pohl and Walther 2007). Thus it is suggested that, de-standardisation and individualisation processes place increased importance on young peoples' subjectivities, particularly motivations and attitudes towards education,

work and training (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2016; Dickerson, Morris, and McDool 2020) as the decisions and choices they make increasingly influence the differentiated transitions and trajectories that they participate in. In this paper, we explore participants' biographicity through unpacking our participants' attempts to reconcile their aspirations with the realities of the labour market.

Contextualising 'the middle'

Roberts (2013) argues that young people in the middle are those that generally do not enter HE but exit compulsory schooling with 'average' qualifications (some GCSEs grade A–C), with 'nearly all' taking further educational and/or vocational courses before starting their full-time employment careers. Such qualifications are expected to yield positive labour market returns, however, Roberts (2013) argues that 'ordinary' young people are increasingly vulnerable because older forms of mid-level work have diminished, and new forms of middling work are more fragile and precarious.

Roberts (2011) depicts his sample group of young men with mid-level qualifications as experiencing relatively successful transitions into stable employment. However, a lack of quality in-work training and inability to advance meant that 'horizontal movements in service sector employment were the dominant experience' and therefore that 'the quality of these jobs and subsequent prospects, rather than sole availability, was of key significance' (Roberts 2011, 31–32). In subsequent follow-up work with the same sample, Roberts (2018, 145) suggested that despite many of his sample engaging in further education courses, his participants struggled to move into higher quality work. Thus, their pre-dominant experience of the labour market was low pay, low-status jobs offering few prospects. Indeed, for Roberts (2018, 139) precarious work and turbulent employment histories increasingly challenged the relationship between paid work, identity and self-worth, that was seen as so significant to the orientations and identities of Brown's (1987) 'ordinary kids'.

More recent quantitative analysis of longitudinal survey-based data sets using sequence analysis of young people's education and labour market status over time provides greater detail of the 'differentiated pathways' that young people take through education and employment. Schoon and Lyons-Amos (2016), for example, identify five clusters or pathways that young people take: 'Extended Education' (34%), 'Early work' (25%), 'Employment after some (further) education' (25%), 'Persistent Unemployment' (10%), 'Inactivity' (6%). They thus suggest that there are distinct pathways taken by young people in the middle that lie between the 'optimal' route into Higher Education and more problematic transitions into persistent unemployment or inactivity.

Explorative research by the DfE (2020) looked specifically at post-16 pathways at (intermediate) level 3 or below. It suggested that 30% of young people at this level experience 'difficult' pathways because their experiences are primarily as NEET (15%), 'benefit cycling' (7%) or 'employment cycling' (8%). However, 70% are described as 'smooth' and 'successful' because they lead either straight into 'sustained employment' or into further education and then sustained employment. It can be suggested that categorising transitions as 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' slips back into a polarising discourse that obscures a more nuanced understanding of transitions in the middle. Moreover, continuous or sustained employment is a rather meek measure of labour market success for those

qualified at level 3 or below as it clearly emphasises quantity of employment rather than quality. Alternatively, we might care to think of a successful transition into employment as one where the young person meets their goals and aspirations and/or is able to apply and develop skills attained through further education or training. In order to measure success in these terms, we need to explore young's people's aspirations, experiences and reflections much more closely.

Before we do, it is worth noting that entry into employment for young people in the UK has been delayed by the extension of compulsory schooling age through the requirement for 17-year-old school leavers to either stay in full-time education or start an apprenticeship (a combination of lower pay in return for a period of training which leads to a qualification) until they are 18. Indeed, the provision of a high number of high-quality apprenticeships has been the flagship policy aimed at middling young people who don't follow the standard academic route to HE. With the implementation of the apprenticeship levy (a UK government policy levying money from employers which must be spent on apprenticeship training) in 2017, the government signalled its intention that apprenticeships would be the key lever into high-quality work for middling school leavers. Both these policy moves have served to intensify the importance of post-16 education and training for young people and their labour market outcomes.

Methodology

As this research focuses on 'the missing middle', operationalising this concept was of critical importance to the research methodology. However, as we have seen there are multiple definitions of 'the missing middle'. MacDonald (2011) suggests that the expansion of university access means that some undergraduate students can now be categorised as falling into the 'the missing middle' category, whilst others define the missing middle as those holding level 2 or 3 qualifications (level 2 qualifications are general basic school level education and level 3 qualifications are advanced more focused education for young people over the age of 16) and thus by the fact that they *don't* go to university (see Roberts 2011, 2013). As currently, 42% of young people will enter university before the age of 21 (Gov 2017) and around 15% don't achieve the level 2 threshold of qualifications (DOE 2017) a strong case can be made for including some university students within the definition of 'the missing middle' as levels 2 and 3 do not precisely correspond to the middle third of qualifications. However, whilst we agree with MacDonald's (2011) observations, we have chosen to focus our explorations of the experiences of the 'missing middle' on a group of young people that do not go to university. This definition has the advantage of being practicable in research terms, as the participants are clearly defined and can be recruited from college education. Thus, here we investigate the school-to-work transition experiences of a segment of 'the missing middle' defined as young people aged between 16 and 24 years old holding level 2 or 3 qualifications [the participants].

A qualitative longitudinal approach was seen as ideal for this research as it is uniquely able to tease out the highly complex interactions between individuals and the labour market that change over time, providing temporal snapshots for the researcher to interpret, rather than relying only on the retrospectively reconstructed account and interpretation of the respondent (Ritchie and Lewis 2014). As we wanted to explore how

aspirations shift as participants first encounter the labour market, i.e. how they biographically manage this period, the initial aim was to conduct two semi-structured qualitative interviews with the participants; firstly, as they left college education to look for work in order to capture their ambitions, hopes and plans at that point. The second interview would be a year later and seek to understand and explore their experiences and aspirations after encountering the reality of the labour market. However, the actual research process proved to be much more messy. In practice, many of the participants had tried to get a job before and were only in college because they had failed to obtain desired employment. Defining 'work' also proved complex. Some participants had been working in casual jobs for some time, alongside education, so were simultaneously in work and education, whilst also looking for a better job. It was striking that the participants' understanding of a 'good' or 'better' job, aligned closely with Brown (1987)'s observation that young people in the middle seek 'decent' and secure working-class jobs that provide a way to 'get on' and are thus central to the achievement of dignity and respect.

Leeds was chosen as the location for the research. It is the third biggest city in the UK (ONS 2011) with an occupational structure that closely mirrors that of the UK more generally (LCC 2016). The total and youth employment rates were also very similar to the UK at a whole at the time of research (LCC 2016). Recruitment took place initially through a college and access was gained to students studying care and computer networking which delivered an even gender split in the 20 interviews that initially took place. Re-contacting participants for second interviews proved very difficult with only six responding to texts after a year. This problem is not uncommon in longitudinal research, particularly when the second interview may be asking the respondent to reflect on failed plans and a lack of progress (Heath et al. 2009). None of the six reinterviewed participants were successful in achieving their aspirations in the second interview. Therefore, although the core of the research was longitudinal research in Leeds, in order to augment the data, 17 one-off retrospective interviews were also undertaken with the target group and the recruitment broadened pragmatically. Recruitment opportunities became available mainly through employment agencies and these provided a cross-section of both successful and unsuccessful outcomes. An employment agency helped to provide 12 participants who were looking for work, or better quality work, as well as four apprentices who were already working for the employment agency. Finally, an additional participant was recruited through contacts in Scotland who had already achieved a high-quality apprenticeship. Whilst not ideal the stories told across the groups were strikingly similar and the retrospective interviews complemented the findings of the longitudinal interviews. The target age was also pragmatically broadened at this point and final interviews were with participants between the ages of 17 and 22. When the opportunity arose, a third and fourth longitudinal interview was also undertaken with two participants. In total 47 interviews took place with 37 participants, 24 men and 23 women. The vast majority of the participants (34 out of 37), however recruited, were working class. The ethnicity profile of the interviews is close to the UK profile (Table 1).

The central topics explored in the interviews focused on the aspects relating to transitions into work including experiences of education; aspirations at the point of leaving education; experiences looking for work and in the job market more generally; the quality of work achieved and how aspirations changed and were managed over time in relation to their experiences. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis

Table 1. Description of the quoted participants.

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Qual	Class	Situation
Alexis	17	Female	White	L2	Working	Working retail
Amy	21	Female	White	L2	Working	Unemployed
Billy	19	Male	White	L2	Working	College
Jazz	17	Female	Asian	L2	Working	College
Courtney	18	Female	Black	L2	Working	College
James	19	Male	White	L2	Middle	Apprenticeship admin
Lee	16	Male	White	L2	Working	Apprenticeship plumbing
Ryan	19	Male	White	L2	Working	Apprenticeship admin
Jonny	22	Male	White	L2	Middle	Apprenticeship admin
Nick	18	Male	White	L2	Middle	Apprenticeship computing
Sophie	17	Female	White	L2	Working	College
Jon	19	Male	White	L2	Working	Unemployed
Chloe	19	Female	White	L2	Working	College
Rudi	19	Female	Mixed ethnicity	L2	Working	Unemployed
Jack	22	Male	White	L3	Middle	Working retail
Danny	19	Male	White	L3	Working	Working retail
Shane	19	Male	White	L3	Working	Working roofer
Zayn (first interview)	17	Male	White	L2	Working	College
Zayn (fourth interview)	20	Male	White	L3	Working	Working call centre

which found some striking consistencies in experiences across the 47 interviews, particularly in relation to experiences in training and the labour market. Intersectionality was not a focus in our initial analysis of the data as commonalities were seen to provide a meaningful account of the experiences of participants, even if some gender differences did emerge (for example in sought occupations) and could be the focus of future research. All names used in the findings are pseudonyms.

Findings

The research analysis captures the pathways of 37 participants from education to work, six through longitudinal interviews as originally intended and the remainder a combination of first interviews that couldn't be followed up and retrospective interviews as a replacement.

Alienated instrumentalists in education

The vast majority of participants' experiences of school were negative with *Lee's* reaction typically direct:

BB: Did you like school?
L: If I'm being honest, no.

Alexis was recruited at a job fair. She was working at Subway (A fast food chain) after dropping out of a hairdressing apprenticeship where she felt exploited:

BB: Did you like school?
A: Not really, no.
BB: What didn't you like about it?
A: Basically, just all of it. It got better when I was in Year 10, because I got put on a two-year diploma doing hair and beauty. That was one day a week, so I'd look forward to that one day a week.

Alexis wanted to do something that she was interested in that related directly to her future work ambitions. This aligns with Brown's (1987) designation of 'ordinary kids' as alienated from academic schooling but looking for a route to 'get on' in work. In 2015, only 3% of school leavers were in full-time employment and only 6% were in an apprenticeship (DfEE 2017). The vast majority of school leavers went to college; however, many of the participants in the sample turned to college because they couldn't get an apprenticeship.

Zayn was one of two students who was interviewed four times. He was recruited in college studying computing but he was eager to get an apprenticeship. Zayn experiences are revisited later:

BB: Why did you choose college in particular?
Z: It were just a local college, … I was actually looking for an apprenticeship last year and couldn't get one.

After one year at college, many participants were still looking out for an apprenticeship in order to complete their level 3 qualification while working.

Sophie was recruited at college, she had just finished level 2 childcare:

> Well, I decided that if I get a job I can do my level three childcare as an apprenticeship, and I would get paid for doing it. It's a win/win situation. You get paid and you get to learn.

As the only other option for these participants was college, the idea of earning and learning, even a low wage, particularly resonated (see also Evans 2020). *James* was one of three of the retrospective participants that had achieved a level 2 business administration apprenticeship in an employment agency. He was one of the few middle-class participants.

> I feel like I'm learning more than college or high school. It also means of course that you get paid which is also great but ah, I think education is more important.

But for most participants apprenticeships were not an option and college was regarded much more positively than school, as Courtney explained:

BB: Do you find college different to school?
C: "Yes. It's a lot better … You can do what you want" … . At school they treat you like babies. They don't help you do what you want to do when you get older.

College allowed participants to express their agency, choose from a wide range of courses and train for a job that they would like to do. However, college and work choices were not unlimited and often bounded by gender, class and family expectations and experiences:

Jazz

BB: Working with children, where do you think that interest came from?
J: My mum and my nan always said I've been good around children, … I think it's because of other people's ideas, of what they've said to me.

Amy

A: My dad works at [Company X] … I've got one brother.
BB: What does he do?
A: He works at Company X as well.

Unsurprisingly, given participants' desire for vocational training, the opportunity to try out work that they aspired to at college was particularly appealing. *Emma* discussed her college placement in a nursery:

BB: Do you enjoy [the placement]?
E: "Yes, I love it". … you learn all sorts of different things, because you learn off the teachers and the kids show you different things to do with them.

However, in this research, work placements were only offered to college students learning childcare.

This section detailed how although participants were alienated from academic learning in school, they continued to seek ways to 'get on' into decent working-class jobs and thus were drawn to college and studying for further qualifications in order to achieve that goal (Brown 1987, 106). In many cases, this would ideally have taken place through an apprenticeship, as the idea of 'earning and learning' strongly resonated and the compromise of a low wage in return for valuable skills and experience made sense to them. Nonetheless, college was a good second option and by the time they left college they had invested two years in training in a course that they chose and in an area that they aspired to continue to 'get on' into.

The realities of labour: experiences of work

Young people's experiences of work could be categorised into three types, 'exploitative work', 'going nowhere work' or achieving 'getting on work'.

Exploitative work

Participants often had very bad experiences in work including precarious hours, low (or no) pay and apprenticeships with low pay and little training. *Jonny* experienced ridiculously low pay as a self-employed marketeer on commission:

BB: What was your first job?
J: That was marketing. I was knocking on doors.
BB: What didn't work out about that then?
J: Lack of payment, mainly. I was getting paid on commission, £50 a week, mostly … 42 hours a week.

Chloe was still at college at her second interview after failing to get an apprenticeship. She had gained a level 3 teaching assistant qualification. Alongside college, she had worked at Burger King (a fast food chain):

C: I used to work at Burger King , but they were just giving me ridiculous hours, like 12 hours, then putting me down to 3 hours. I just quit.

Chloe was hoping to get a job in a school but if not she would go back to the retail sector.

Amy experienced a particularly exploitative apprenticeship:

BB: And what kind of training did you get?
A: It was all kinda on the job … Straight after the apprenticeship they … didn't keep me on so they just kind of said see you later … I didn't get paid anything.

Alexis left the hairdressing apprentice that she had dreamed of getting after a year:

> You get training, one day you'd go to college. … , and in the salon, you were meant to do training as well, but I only did about, maybe, three, four days training out of the whole year … I was just a cleaner to them.

Experiences in exploitative work involving very low pay, insecure hours and little training were common amongst participants in this research.

'Going nowhere' work

These jobs were understood by participants to have only induction training and very few prospects. Often these were jobs in retail or restaurants – occupations that are readily available to young people but which are the least-likely to provide training to young workers (TUC 2018; Roberts 2018). They were sometimes considered useful by participants as a source of income while looking for better quality work, although some participants were wary of becoming trapped and resisted this kind of work.

Rudi wanted a job in sports, an area she studied in college to level 3:

> it's been hard to get a job in sport actually cos there's not many. … I've been applying for just different ones cos obviously I want to earn some money. Cos I'm thinking short term at the moment so the likes of Tesco [a supermarket chain], working in bars, that kind of thing.

Alexis who was currently trying to get a better job than working at Subway:

> BB: Do you feel that you have a choice in the kinds of jobs that you do, then?
> A: No. I think, whereas, like, the job I've got now at Subway, Subway usually does take on young people, whereas the job I want … no one seems to want to give it.

'Going nowhere' jobs lack prospects and meaning but they have instrumental value and are often accepted by participants while they are looking for 'Getting on' work.

'Getting on' work

Five apprentices were interviewed in this research – four worked in a youth employability agency doing level 2 apprenticeships, whilst *Lee* had achieved a four-year plumbing apprenticeship in Scotland. Their experiences of apprenticeships were overwhelmingly positive because they were developing skills in a work environment and they gained confidence and meaning from this experience. The valorising of apprenticeships by participants suggests the continuing relevance of Brown's (1987) observation that young people in the middle share a very particular and classed way of valuing education and skill development that is closely linked to their relevance to the workplace.

Nick was fortunate to get an apprenticeship in computing at the employment agency:

> I enjoy it. I enjoy the routine of getting up every day and getting up early and finishing late. At school, I always wanted to get out early, but I don't mind staying when I'm doing this, because I know how to do it, I'm good at computers. Do you know what I mean?

Ryan was another of the business admin apprentices at the employment agency. He was the only apprentice that was from a working-class background:

> It's changed me for the better really to be honest cos it gives me like a purpose, something to do … other stuff has changed as well, my confidence. I wouldn't have been able to pick up a phone before this or even talk to a stranger. But now I'm on reception a lot so I can just go up and speak to them without really caring to be honest, so it's changed me quite a lot that way and that's helped me.

There are, however, noticeable differences in the quality of the training experiences of the level 2 English apprentices and the Scottish apprentice *Lee*, interestingly this also impacted on the confidence of the apprentices that they would achieve a permanent job at the end of the apprenticeship:

> BB: How long is your apprenticeship?
> L: Four years … I'll work two days at college and three days working on the building site.
> BB: It's going to be quite a decent qualification then, is it?
> L: Yes, probably. They'll probably ask me to stay on.

Jonny

> J: Well for the first 12 weeks as well as working full time here we do a 12 week technical certificate. So once a week we go away from the workplace to a classroom.
> BB: And do you enjoy it?
> J: Ah yeah. I love it. I've enjoyed pretty much everything that I've done so far.
> BB: And is there the possibility of staying on in the job?
> J: There is always the possibility but it's uncertain at the moment.

The year after the interviews took place the youth employability agency closed due to cuts in government funding so it is likely that the four apprentices employed there had to start looking for work again.

Reflections on work experiences: pinballing and disciplined subjectivities

Participants in this study wanted to 'get on' into decent work (Brown 1987, 106). For many, this would ideally have been in an apprenticeship offering 'earning and learning' in a workplace environment. However, for the vast majority in this study that opportunity was not available, so college fulfilled their desire for choice and training. Participants left college hoping to find decent secure work, but soon found their qualifications had little leverage in a labour market dominated by exploitative and 'going nowhere' jobs. This created a disconnect between their aspirations to 'get on' and the reality of the youth labour market and resulted in extended periods of pinballing (Cuzzocrea 2020). These experiences were characterised by periods of looking for apprenticeships or work with training, perhaps resisting 'going nowhere' work for a time or temporally accepting it for instrumental reasons whilst continually looking for something else. The majority of participants were still making efforts to achieve work with training and prospects, but some had stopped making the effort to get better work and had resigned themselves to 'going nowhere' work for the medium term. The process of biographicity had for them, become a reconciliation with the reality of low-quality work.

Aged 22, *Jack* was older than most of the participants. Despite gaining a level 3 qualification in business studies at college, he had become stuck in retail jobs since leaving education at the age of 18. Jack now worked in a shop during the day and in a bar most evenings:

BB: Out of your qualifications, now you're working, which qualifications do you think have helped you most to get a job?

J: None of them. None of them at all. (Laughter)

When low-quality work had been accepted as an on-going reality, participants reflected on their frustrated ambitions and wasted effort:

Danny

D: "I finished electrics there was no other way for electrics – no apprenticeships going on" … [I'm A] Sales manager … I was in a similar sort of role when I started college. I left that job, and fell back into a similar sort of role I'm in now … It was pretty disheartening … wasting my time.

BB: And how did you get the particular job you've got now?

D: Just with the sales training that I've got … just the experience. They never look at your grades.

Shane

S: I've almost finished a subsidiary level three in civil engineering. I've left [because there are no apprenticeships] and am now training to be a roofer … I think I'd definitely advise me kids … just to get a trade from the start. That's how I'd put it otherwise it's just a waste of time to just do it how I've done it. It's a waste of five years … I've just lost faith in the education thing after all this. I've had enough.

At his last interview, Zayn hadn't managed to get the apprenticeship he so desperately wanted. Whilst he was resigned to his fate, his attitude to his situation was different:

Z: Obviously I'd attempted every year since in college [3 years] for apprenticeships, I didn't get any luck so I though right I'm not going to devote it all again to apprenticeships, so I'll do it for a couple of months, look around see if I get anything, if not, that's life I'll look for something else, … didn't get anything … . I end up going for an interview with Lloyds banking group and I got a job there I did so I'm now in full-time work. I'm doing telephone banking. At first it was really well, then I sorta hit a rough patch I though oh is this really for me?, then I sorta got over it and I'm … quite happy right now … .

BB: What have you learned in the last year.

Z: [pause] … I've learned how to deal with different people. I was, quite honestly I'm not someone for confrontation … but then being in the job and having people constantly shouting at ya or venting at ya, you sorta learn to just … nod it off.

BB: If you decide to have a family one day, what advice would you give them, your kids, based on your experiences.

Z: Don't give up on your dream or if you get knocked back don't let it bother you, just carry on. I went for loads of interviews and got knocked back … obviously looking for a job I did get quite low cause I thought … [voice quivers] "it's another knock back" and then when I got one I thought "no my hard work's paid off".

The strength of longitudinal interviews is evident here because Zayn was clear in previous interviews that his dream job was a computing apprenticeship. His biographical narrative had changed and the 'dream' was now a call centre job where being 'constantly shout [ed]' at was part of his everyday working life. It appeared from his account that his lack of success in achieving his initial aspirations had led to feel 'quite happy' just to be working in a secure job. Participants were vulnerable to low-quality work because their

work ethic was strong and work remained fundamentally important to the achievement of a dignified life, as *Danny's* account suggests:

BB: Can you tell me what getting a job means to you?
D: It's your freedom; it's your money; it's everything. If you don't have a job, you're sat at home, broke.

Participants expressed orientations toward education, training and work that aligned very closely to Brown's (1987) classic study of 'ordinary kids'. This was most clearly apparent in their repeated efforts to 'get on' into secure work with prospects. This was the central focus of all of the young people's aspirations in this study because decent work remains a central source of meaning, dignity and respect for them. However, as with Brown (1987), the dominant experience was of work that failed to match their aspirations for decent work.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has looked more closely at the transition experiences of a segment of the 'missing middle' – those that often seek to enter employment at the completion of compulsory education with level 2 or level 3 qualifications. We have seen that most participants failed to achieve their aspirations for 'getting on' work. Their labour market experiences were dominated by either exploitative very low-quality work or 'going nowhere' work that offered little training or development prospects. Thus, participants spent a lot of time simultaneously working in jobs for instrumental purposes, whilst looking for better quality work. As such, their experiences chime with Cuzzocrea's (2020) depiction of a pinball youth who are required to take risks with unclear and unpredictable outcomes, such as acquiring skills or training that may not be useful, and expending high amounts of energy and effort attempting to resist or move on from low-quality and exploitative work. That young's people's agency and choices very often did *not* lead to their aspirations being met, highlights their lack of control over their work path, and leads us to question the (over)emphasis on agency, choice and decision-making in some recent work on transitions in the middle (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2016). Transitions in the middle are more profoundly shaped by the nature of the youth labour market, than by the education and work choices made by young people.

The biggest threat facing the young people in this study was getting 'stuck' in poor quality low-paying jobs that are sticky precisely because they don't provide the skills and training needed in order to progress over time. Irwin (2020) has suggested that the supply-side focus of UK skills policy over the last two decades creates contradictory outcomes. In this case, the fundamental contradiction playing out was between young people's aspirations for decent work and the reality of a youth labour market that offers few opportunities to 'get on' into good quality work (Irwin 2020). Experiences of apprenticeships were generally positive as they resonated closely with participants' desires to 'earn' and 'learn'. Yet, despite their favourable viewing, only a small number of participants in the sample managed to secure an apprenticeship.

A significant minority of the older participants had come to accept low-quality work without prospects or training, as their on-going destination, and were making few current efforts to apply for better jobs. Their aspirations and efforts had been frustrated

so many times that their subjectivities had effectively been disciplined. This may be an alternative version of the process that Peck (2001, 6) once described as 'creating workers for jobs that nobody wants'. Peck was referring to the growing use of compulsion and mandatory workfare policies in jobcentres to enforce poor work on the unemployed. However, it may be the case that young people in the middle are now being disciplined into playing this role. Brown suggested (1987) that because 'getting on' into decent work was about achieving dignity, meaning and respect, ordinary kids may reject low-quality work that lacked such potential. Yet, in some cases in this study, it seemed that young's people's biographicity had been reduced to accepting the inevitability of low-quality work or reconstructing aspirations for quality work into gratitude for simply being employed.

We must be wary of defining positive labour market outcomes in terms of continuous employment or the quantity rather than the quality of work that young people enter, otherwise there is a very real threat that their struggles to 'get on' into decent work are rendered unproblematic and the experiences of this segment of the 'missing middle' will continue to go 'missing'.

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