Education, Work and Social Change

Young People and Marginalisation in Post-Industrial Britain

Robin Simmons
Ron Thompson and
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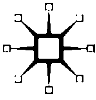

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This book is dedicated to our children

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1
Introduction

Young people and marginality

This book is about 24 young people whose stories illuminate the experiences of marginalized youth in post-industrial Britain. Drawing on data from a longitudinal ethnographic study of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), the book charts their experiences, identities and aspirations over a period of more than two years, but also locates their trajectories within a broader discussion of the social and economic context which has shaped the lives of a generation often described as 'lost'. A central part of the book consists of detailed case studies of six participants, which provide an insight into both the nature of the data and particular themes we want to emphasize.

Popular images of NEET young people often evoke pejorative stereotypes of 'hoodies' and 'pramface girls' destined for a life on benefits. In August 2011, when a series of riots erupted in London and other parts of England, politicians and the media seized on these events to portray an increasing threat from out-of-control youth in 'Broken Britain'. Prime Minister David Cameron, attributing the riots to 'social problems that have been festering for decades' (BBC 2011), claimed that Britain had become 'literally de-moralized' and announced that policies to improve parenting and education, and turn around the lives of troubled families, would be accelerated. However, there is another perspective on such stories, and it is necessary to look much deeper than isolated events or the behaviour of a small proportion of individuals and their families. First of all, there is little evidence that a swathe of young people in Britain have become disconnected from the aspirations and values of mainstream society (MacDonald and Marsh 2005). The research presented here, as well as other studies, suggests that disadvantaged young

people generally have quite traditional aspirations, for a job, a home and a family life. Secondly, phenomena such as mass youth unemployment or disaffection from education are related to changes in society on a global scale, although the extent to which social problems actually occur is influenced by policy decisions in individual nation states. This book aims to explore the rich ethnographic data at our disposal by locating it within these global shifts in social experience and to enable the voices of young people to be heard as they recount the stories of their lives and ambitions. A central theme is that their attitudes and behaviours are shaped in the same way as other people's, by the conditions in which they live and work, by the challenges they face and by the resources available to them. We also examine more specific facets of their engagement with work, education and training, and welfare, drawing attention to the ways in which the construction of NEET young people within social policy shapes their experience and future prospects.

Negative images of youth-as-trouble, of disengaged young people as a threat to society and a drain on its resources, have always been offset (to some extent) by more caring representations of youth-in-trouble and the benefits to society that would ensue if their talents could be harnessed. This dual representation of marginalized youth was expressed particularly clearly in Tony Blair's foreword to *Bridging the Gap*, a report on NEET young people produced in the early years of New Labour government.

> The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience . . . Getting this right offers the prospect of a double dividend. A better life for young people themselves, saving them from the prospect of a lifetime of dead-end jobs, unemployment, poverty, ill-health and other kinds of exclusion. A better deal for society as a whole that has to pay a very high price in terms of welfare bills and crime for failing to help people make the transition to becoming independent adults.
>
> (SEU 1999, p.6)

The reference to social exclusion reminds us that in the last 20 years concerns about poverty have been discursively reconstructed as problems of participation – in education, work and other social contexts. The reason why people and communities are poor, beset by social problems, or both, is because they are excluded from one or more forms of participation, often interacting with each other. Within this

paradigm, education plays a central role – in creating responsible citizens, equipping young people with the skills they need to find work and improving the quality of parenting. However, the concept of social exclusion has risen to prominence at precisely the time when the power of nation states to assure a link between participation and prosperity is declining. Globalization, and the intensification of capitalist accumulation, has led to many young people in Western societies being confronted with what Loïc Wacquant (1996) calls *advanced marginality*. Changes to the nature of wage labour, the increasing disconnection of the lowest-paid from the benefits of economic growth and the decline of social infrastructure in certain neighbourhoods all limit the capacity of participation to remove the threat of poverty. Whilst some of these changes are felt most acutely in large cities, their ramifications are also felt elsewhere, and one of the arguments of this book is that marginality is a powerful lens through which to view the experiences of NEET young people.

Within such conceptions of marginality, certain forms of education and training can be seen as particularly problematic, and education as a place to 'warehouse' young people until the labour market has need of them has been extensively critiqued, as a contemporary reconstitution of the reserve army of labour or as part of a 'political economy of youth' in which intergenerational exploitation parallels some aspects of class relations (Ainley 2013; Coté 2013). Even from an instrumental perspective that sees education simply as readying young people for work, such provision has been criticized as inadequate and likely to lead to further marginalization or exclusion. The stigmatization and poor labour market returns associated with low-level vocational provision and condemned in the Wolf Review (2011) is a case in point. As we discuss later in the book, the young people in our research were often reluctant to participate in programmes which they found dull and repetitive, and rarely led to higher-level study or suitable employment.

This chapter sets the scene for the remainder of the book. We first provide a brief overview of the research project on which it is based, and then introduce some of the key concepts we will develop and draw upon later. In addition to tracing how young people who leave education at an early stage have been constructed as a problem group, the chapter also discusses some broader issues of social change, including the debate over individualization, reflexive modernization and structural inequality, and the theorizations of class, gender and race in education which will be needed as we present our data. The chapter ends by outlining the structure of the book and looking ahead to our conclusions.

An ethnographic study of the experiences of NEET young people

Our interest in conducting research with young people on the margins of education and employment stems from a combination of factors. As social and educational researchers, we have a long-standing interest in social class, inequality and social justice, as well as the relationship between education and the economy more broadly. Working in a university school of education during the mid-2000s sharpened our interest in these matters, as it became apparent that the composition of our student body was changing in ways related to particular conceptions of work, education and learning. Our institution is a large provider of teacher training for the post-compulsory education sector and, for many years, tutors in further education (FE) colleges and similar settings have undertaken programmes of professional development at the university. Over time, however, we saw a distinct change in the intake of these courses. Whilst academic disciplines such as English, history or sociology, and established vocational subjects like engineering, accountancy or construction were declining, there had been a notable increase in the number of ‘key skills’ and ‘employability’ tutors. Moreover, whilst some of these practitioners were teaching in FE colleges, many more worked for training providers focusing specifically on work-related and pre-vocational training aimed at NEET young people. At the same time, political and academic debate about social exclusion and its causes directed our attention to youth employment and unemployment, and the role of so-called employability programmes. In September 2008 we began an ethnographic study of young people taking part in Entry to Employment (E2E), a training programme designed to prepare young people outside education and the labour market for the workplace (Simmons and Thompson 2011).

Whilst our E2E research provided valuable insights into the nature of education and training for young people at risk of becoming NEET, it was evident that a more wide-ranging study of the lived experience of marginalized young people would provide a fuller understanding of their lives and the challenges and opportunities facing them. Whilst education is an important site of social differentiation and reproduction it is, after all, only one facet of an individual’s broader societal experiences. Our aim of engaging in longitudinal ethnographic research with a group of young people initially outside education and employment became a reality when we were fortunate enough to obtain a research

grant from the Leverhulme Trust, which enabled us to carry out the work upon which this book is based.

The project, *An Ethnographic Study of the Experiences of NEET Young People,* was conducted between August 2010 and June 2013. Fieldwork took place in two neighbouring local authorities in the north of England between October 2010 and March 2013; 24 young people took part in the ethnography for substantial periods of time although, for various reasons, four of them ended their involvement between October and December 2011. Of the remaining 20 participants, 12 were female; six of the young women were parents or became pregnant during the research. One young man was a father. Ten participants had spent at least some time in care and 15 lived alone. Two young women were of Pakistani descent and one young man was of mixed heritage; the others were White. All were between 15 and 20 years old when the fieldwork commenced in late 2010. By the end of the project, our data included over 280 hours of participant observation conducted in a variety of settings. Seventy-eight interviews were conducted and transcribed, including 20 with practitioners such as Connexions advisers, Jobcentre staff and tutors in training providers; three with employers; and 54 with young people. Other forms of data were collected during the course of the study, including photographs taken by the researcher and by participants; copies of qualifications and certificates of achievement; minutes of practitioner meetings; national and local statistics; and course information literature.

The young people who took part in the research had differing circumstances, educational trajectories and aspirations. However, although one must generalize with caution, certain trends were evident. Some participants had been academically successful at school, but the majority had negative experiences of education and few academic qualifications. In some cases, particularly for those who had been in care, frequent changes of residence had led not only to disrupted patterns of schooling, but being allocated to schools with places available due to lack of popularity and/or high pupil turnover. Perhaps the main common factor in our sample is that they were from largely working-class backgrounds and, in the majority of cases, participants had lived for most of their lives in deprived areas. In many ways, the very richness and diversity of the data generated by longitudinal qualitative research can provide challenges for analysis and presentation. Moreover, when researching the lives of NEET young people, it is important to bear in mind that differences within particular subcategories – such as teenage parents,

young offenders and care leavers – can be as great as those between them (Finlay et al. 2010). For this reason, although the book also draws on our data more broadly, the presentation of findings largely adopts a case-study approach. Individual young people's stories are used not only to illustrate key themes emerging from our research but also to highlight patterns of difference as well as similarity. The six case studies represent something of the diversity of the NEET population, with different biographies, circumstances and responses; they illuminate the themes we wish to explore, but in different ways and sometimes by exception as much as by example.

The normalization of extended schooling

The emergence of the NEET category reflects the normalization of full-time post-compulsory education or training as the initial stage in school-to-work transitions. Whilst in earlier decades the great majority of young people expected to enter full-time employment soon after completing their compulsory education, the decline of youth labour markets associated with de-industrialization in the late 1970s and 1980s confronted school-leavers with a context of sharply reduced employment opportunities, particularly for those with few qualifications. Young people's experiences became more individualized and fragmented, as collective transitions from school to factory or mine were replaced by a diversity of jobs, often with smaller employers, particularly in the service sector, or a place on the much-criticized training schemes developed to absorb the rising tide of youth unemployment. Whilst young people with high levels of educational attainment, particularly those from middle-class backgrounds, were able to take advantage of increasing opportunities in higher education, the majority were consigned to various forms of vocational education or a place on a youth training scheme.

Young people who rejected these options to seek employment came under increasing pressure, and in 1988 their entitlement to unemployment benefit was removed. Effectively, the unemployed young person ceased to exist, and was replaced with a more problematic figure, the young person outside education and employment. This shift exemplified broader trends to individualize social and economic risk, reflecting the emphasis on markets at the expense of collective institutions characteristic of neo-liberalism. The slogan 'Education, education, education' used by Tony Blair during the 1997 election campaign crystallized an approach in which supply-side initiatives, aimed at creating a workforce

suited to the demands of post-industrial economies, are seen as more effective and sustainable than interventions aimed at increasing the demand for labour. The global mobility of capital, it is claimed, leaves no alternative, for if productivity and skills are uncompetitive investment – and jobs – will go elsewhere.

The expansion of education and training is an immediate corollary of this argument; if the UK is to compete in a global marketplace, young people must be equipped with the knowledge and skills sought by employers and be prepared to retrain when these skills become outdated. Youth unemployment is attributed to a lack of skills, not a lack of jobs, and extended periods of post-compulsory education are seen as essential to avoiding recurrent exclusion from the labour market. However, the benefits of such policies have been felt largely by employers, and young people are required to run in order to stand still. As educational credentials become extended to the great majority of young people, the least qualified school-leavers become progressively more disadvantaged in the labour market (Roberts 2004, p.212). Forty years ago, most young people left school without qualifications; now, 'sixteen-year-olds who insist that they want proper jobs and who try to avoid all alternatives have become a new problem group' (Roberts 2009, p.358).

Introduced initially as a euphemistic term to replace perhaps more emotive descriptions such as 'Status 0' (Istance et al. 1994), the NEET category has framed UK policy discourses on youth unemployment for two decades. Although it has well-known limitations – for example, the diversity entailed by the definition *not* in education, employment or training – the concept of NEET has taken root in many other countries, particularly those dominated by neo-liberal philosophies. Most recently, it has become established in analyses of youth unemployment in the European Community (Eurofound 2012), and although the institutional environment varies considerably between countries which employ the NEET category, its relationship with individualized conceptions of social risk is well established. Furthermore, the scope of NEET has increased considerably as concerns have grown over graduate unemployment and the labour market engagement of other young people over the age of 18. Whilst initially restricted in the UK to 16–18-year-olds, the term now comprises young people under 25 and, in some contexts, extends to the age of 30 or more.

In general, we will avoid talking about NEET young people as a group, due to their disparate circumstances. Generalizations are problematic, and being NEET is not necessarily undesirable for all young people. Occupations such as motherhood or taking a gap year are valued by

many, and pursuing activities unrelated to the labour market may be rational in some circumstances. Nevertheless, there is overwhelming evidence that, for the majority, being NEET is likely to have severe consequences in later life. Moreover, both the risk and consequences of early exclusion from education and employment are unequally distributed in society; and from the earliest interest in NEET young people, it has been clear that these risks are structured by gender, ethnicity and – above all – social class.

Individualization, identity and class

Theorists of late modernity argue that social conditions are experienced in increasingly differentiated ways from person to person (Bauman 1988; Giddens 1991; Beck 1992). According to these accounts, the traditions and certainties associated with industrial societies are supplanted by reflexive modernization, in which the self must confront the multiplicity of choices, risks and dangers encountered in post-industrial times unaided by the prefigured scripts of class, gender, religion and culture which characterized earlier generations. As Kehily (2009) points out, reflexive modernity is often taken to imply the primacy of freely created identities, constructed from the fluidity, mobility and choice offered by late modern social worlds. Phrases such as 'the entrepreneurship of self' (Rose 1998, p.158) or 'choice biographies' provide articulations of contemporary selfhood through recurring themes of plurality, selection and self-narration. However, an alternative reading of reflexive modernization recognizes that, far from ending the inequalities associated with industrial societies, it presents new opportunities for capitalist accumulation in exploiting burgeoning varieties of selfhood. Beck (1992) and authors such as Giddens (1991) and Lash (1992) see individualization as a characteristic feature of capitalism in late modernity. Increased heterogeneity within the middle and working classes (Wacquant 2008), the culturalization of the economy, and the valuing and revaluing of ordinary people as neo-liberal subjects enable the exploitation of labour in both mundane and newly created ways (Skeggs 2004).

What changes is the way in which class relations are perceived. Whilst class-based inequalities have remained remarkably stable in the transition from industrial to post-industrial society, they have been recast in terms of differentiated individual responses to the social and economic risks of wage labour, such as unemployment and deskilling. In this way, the individual lives out the complexity and diversity of the social relations surrounding them, without necessarily confronting them as

questions of class. Reflexivity goes only so far, and problems such as unemployment, ill-health and crime are perceived in the light of individual dispositions and failings, or as the price to be paid for freedom and choice. Globalization, the weakening of family and community structures, and the conjunction of technological progress with decreasing confidence in science and authority confront individuals with a variety of options and disrupt their capacity for engaging in collective action. For many young people, marginality or exclusion is a normal part of life or is seen as a stage in their transition to adulthood; it does not immediately strike them in terms of class structures or their intersections with gender and ethnicity. Moreover, activities in which young people engage have, to some extent, ceased to segregate them by gender or class; service-sector employment, higher education and certain forms of popular culture attract young people from many backgrounds. However, although all social groups are affected by the risks of late modernity, structural factors retain their importance. Class, gender and ethnic patterns in youth transitions have by no means disappeared (Furlong 2009), even if the ways that young people deal with decisions concerning education, employment or consumption have diversified and fragmented. Furlong and Cartmel (2007) refer to the apparent contradiction between objective and subjective experiences as the *epistemological fallacy* of late modernity, remarking that 'People's life chances remain highly structured at the same time as they increasingly seek solutions on an individual, rather than a collective basis' (p.5).

Bauman (1988) proposes that identities no longer wait to be assumed as a young person enters adulthood: 'Everyone has to ask himself the question "who am I", "how should I live", "who do I want to become" – and at the end of the day, be prepared to accept responsibility for the answer . . . Self construction of the self is, so to speak, a necessity.' (p.62). In a longitudinal study such as ours, the location of identity-work within the temporal sphere is a critical condition of analysis, and the development of identity states over time gives rise to contradictions, repetitions and sudden departures, particularly with young people vulnerable to personal and economic crises and in shifting relationships with practitioners, the 'street-level bureaucrats' at the crucial interface between young people and the state (Lipsky 1980). A unifying theme emerging from our study was the expression of what McDonald (1999) has called the *struggle for subjectivity*: the endeavours of participants to establish and maintain a sense of agency in the face of identities projected by the state, or the disruptions of sometimes chaotic personal circumstances (Thompson et al. 2014). Narratives of conflict and resistance

constantly recurred, reflecting disconnections between official conceptions of legitimate activities and our participants' sense of self, belonging and aspiration.

As we will see in this book, processes of individualization and reflexive modernization have only obscured the ways in which social and economic structures shape young people's lives, not obliterated them. Social reproduction, the processes by which relations of dominance and subordination are perpetuated, continues to operate: the conditions of late modernity have diversified young people's biographies, but their trajectories remain profoundly influenced by their location in a matrix of class, gender and race positions. Reflexive practices re-articulate class inequalities under conditions of 'structured fragmentation' (Farrugia 2013). In times when working-class kids can no longer be sure even of working-class jobs, it is necessary to reconcile the construction of biographical projects with contemporary realizations of social reproduction.

Theorizing social class and education

Theoretical explanations of social class differences in educational experiences and attainment have been central to the sociology of education for more than half a century. Whilst genetic theories have retained many adherents throughout this period (see the brief review in Bukodi et al. 2013), there has been no convincing case made to support the idea that measured cognitive ability is largely biologically inherited. Sociological theories which focus on cultural processes and inequalities in power and resources have consequently been more influential, and the work of theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein informs much contemporary research into social reproduction. Although class is traditionally conceptualized in terms of the relations of capitalist production, Bourdieu broadens the idea of capital to include cultural and social dimensions in addition to economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). These *forms of capital* are deployed 'in the struggle (or competition) for the appropriation of scarce goods . . . it follows that the structure of [social space] is given by the distribution of the various forms of capital . . . ' (Bourdieu 1987, p.4). Classes are characterized by the shape of their particular distributions of capital, and class struggle may be expressed in symbolic form, in attempts to maximize the effectiveness of certain elements of cultural capital, as well as through more obvious competition in the economic field.

For Bourdieu, class relations are embodied within the individual along cognitive and behavioural axes – the habitus, as Bourdieu calls the

internalized principles which govern our responses to situations, is both the conditioned product of past experiences in the social field and the means by which the field is recognized and known (Bourdieu 1977, pp.82–83). Cultural capital therefore exists in an embodied state, as long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, as well as being objectified in cultural goods – books, pictures, musical instruments – or institutionalized in educational qualifications. Social capital, which Bourdieu conceives as the resources linked to social networks, depends on the extent of the networks to which an individual belongs, and the aggregated capitals to which these networks give access. As we will see later in this book, many participants had quite extensive social networks; however, the aggregate capital that could be mobilized through these networks was limited.

According to Bourdieu, the function of the education system is to reward those whose habitus, and with it their accumulations of social and cultural capital, are best adapted to the dominant culture of the field, whilst convincing others that their exclusion from this culture is both legitimate and a matter of no great regret. Bernstein (2000) focuses more closely on the discursive structures within the education system itself, and their relationship with distributions of power and control within society. Bernstein places great emphasis on the cognitive and linguistic forms associated with different class positions, and sees the emergence of a new middle class, highly dependent on educational success relative to other groups, as a significant factor in working-class underachievement. As in Bourdieu's account, the dissonance between dominant cultural forms and the cultures more typical of working-class families makes education an alienating experience for many children from such backgrounds. Although both of these perspectives have been criticized for positioning working-class cultures as deficient, they are rich in insights and have been used with great power in many contemporary accounts of social reproduction.

Rather than seeing educational under-achievement as the result of failure to come to terms with dominant cultures, Paul Willis, in his famous ethnography *Learning to Labour* (1977), develops an account of how some young people from working-class backgrounds actively reject the culture of the school in preference to the resistance which they associate with the relations of production in working-class employment. Although focusing on 'the lads' who embrace this culture of resistance, Willis's work also recognizes a different working-class culture, the 'ear 'oles' who aspire to social mobility through educational achievement; Phil Brown's *Schooling Ordinary Kids* (1987) takes up this point in more detail, providing a typology of responses to education which

suggest how a range of outcomes can derive from relatively homogeneous social backgrounds. More recent studies, such as Archer et al. (2010), deploy the notion of identity to powerful effect, blending class, gender and ethnicity in an integrated account of urban schooling and youth transitions.

A somewhat different perspective is provided by the work of Raymond Boudon (1974). This approach has two components: the first focuses on inequalities in educational achievement, whilst the second considers how education translates into achieved social status. As we have already seen, this second component highlights the important point that large-scale social mobility requires equally large-scale changes in the occupational structure, particularly if the education system is expanding. In the first component of his model, Boudon distinguishes between the primary effects of social stratification – differences in educational performance between different social groups – and secondary effects, which concern the choices made by young people from different social backgrounds but with similar levels of educational achievement. Whilst Boudon acknowledges that the explanation for primary effects may follow the lines proposed by Bourdieu, he sees secondary effects as largely deriving from a rational evaluation of the likely benefits of particular educational choices compared with their costs – social and cultural as well as economic. Because secondary effects are cumulative over a school career, Boudon argues that they have greater importance than primary effects. Social class differences in educational achievement are therefore not the consequence of fundamental differences in values, but arise from the different evaluations of educational opportunities made by people occupying different social positions. In our view, Boudon's approach – which has been better known within the field of social mobility studies than in the sociology of education – has a great deal to offer in understanding the trajectories of young people, such as those who took part in our research.

Educational achievement is only one of many factors operating to produce social inequality, and particularly in relation to gender and ethnicity, cultural norms and expectations still help to channel young people into traditional occupational and social roles, although such processes are significantly mediated by social class. The effects of race and gender interact in complex ways with those of class. As Terry Lovell points out, even the concept of class may be subjected to critique in that gender relations may be concealed by using households and families as the units of class analysis (Lovell 2004, p.37). Similarly, class may be used to 'analyse away' racial differences in achievement. Although

in quantitative terms class has a greater impact on educational achievement than either race or gender (Moore 2004, p.15), there is a danger that statistical analysis can erase important inequalities by focusing on the largest effects (Gillborn 2010a). Moreover, deterministic ascriptions of life chances to whole sections of society can be misleading, and differences within groups are just as important as those between them.

Recent work in the sociology of education has acknowledged that inequalities of gender, race and class cannot be fully understood in isolation (Gillborn 2010b), and intersectionality – the exploration of lived experience as constructed simultaneously through classed, raced and gendered subjectivities and structures – has been increasingly prominent. These intersectional studies move beyond economic understandings to draw on culturalist forms of class analysis, which provide greater scope for discussing the different ways in which class position impacts on young men and women (Archer et al. 2007). For example, class differences in the performance of 'hyper-heterosexual' femininities, constructed around themes such as heterosexual relationships, romance and motherhood, have been implicated in the resistances to schooling of young working-class women. Cultural analysis has also been used to examine shifts in the representation of working-class life associated with de-industrialization, showing how markers of the 'rough' as opposed to 'respectable' working class have been racialized and feminized to draw on images of young, Black gang members or teenage mothers rather than 'Andy Capp' figures (Skeggs 2004).

Structure of the book

The book begins with a discussion of the concepts of poverty, social exclusion and marginalization. Although to some extent these concepts have become part and parcel of academic and political discussion, they are also complex ideas which carry a wide range of connotations, meaning different things to different people. They have also been extensively critiqued from a variety of standpoints, and our discussion aims both to review the key features of the debates concerning poverty and social exclusion and to establish our own usage. We also indicate why, in some contexts, we prefer the term 'marginalization' to 'social exclusion', and relate this term to the political and economic positioning of marginalized people. An important feature of contemporary discursive constructions of the marginalized or socially excluded is that their plight can be traced to particular cultures within certain families, cultures which – whilst ultimately having material roots and therefore

susceptible to material intervention – are inimical to the work ethic which might enable these families to find a route out of poverty. This type of explanation finds a particularly clear and pervasive expression in the notion of cultures of worklessness, and we begin to draw on our ethnographic data to illustrate and contest some of the propositions contained in cultural explanations of poverty. Within this data, the accounts of practitioners contrast markedly with the attitudes expressed by the young people who took part in our research: whilst terms such as 'three generations of worklessness' and 'breaking the cycle' of deprivation were embedded in practitioner discourse, young people contested these discourses and sought to resist their moral evaluations and attributions. However, we leave it to later chapters to further explore our data and the light it casts on the varied attitudes to work of individual participants.

In Chapter 3, the focus turns to the specific issue of young people outside education, employment and training. In addition to tracing the influence of social and economic change on youth transitions generally, we discuss the conceptual shift away from youth unemployment to more individualized ways of thinking about the labour market vulnerability of young people. Following the introduction of the NEET category as an instrument of policy analysis in the mid-1990s a veritable explosion took place in research, policy initiatives and practical interventions, with the aim of identifying effective ways of moving vulnerable young people into education or training. We draw on this evidence to analyse the structure of the NEET population and to review some of the most significant research findings, including the relationship between becoming NEET and being socially and economically disadvantaged in childhood and adolescence. We also outline some of the evidence regarding the impact in later life of exclusion or marginality in post-compulsory education and the labour market.

Having established the broad nature of the NEET category, we turn in Chapter 4 to the methodology of our research project. Ethnography provides a distinctive approach to social research, and the chapter begins with a discussion of the nature of ethnography and the knowledge it generates. In focusing on a number of young people whose lives were largely disconnected from each other, our project departs in some ways from traditional conceptions of ethnography with their emphasis on single, tightly defined sites. The implications of a multi-site approach are explored, and located within the relationship between geographically and contextually mobile individuals and broader concerns about inequality and power which are characteristic of critical ethnography.

Chapter 4 also explains the origins of the research project and outlines the social and economic context of the towns of Middlebridge and Greenford, where the research took place. The chapter also outlines the process of data collection and the nature of the data gathered, together with an overview of the 24 young people who took part in the research and how we met them. Some examples of ethnographic data are provided, and we discuss some of the practical and ethical issues encountered in the research.

Although most participants were NEET at the beginning of our research, the great majority engaged in various forms of education, training and employment in the ensuing months. Chapter 5 provides the background to this engagement, first examining the structure of the UK labour market and its relationship to the employment of young people, and then taking up the issue of education and training, particularly in relation to those for whom academic learning has been unproductive. This is not to say that we concur with discourses of the 'non-academic' and of differentiated educational systems; rather, we note that there have been successive failures within education to tackle the problem of parity of esteem which has been so divisive, especially in the English system. Within our discussion, we review two forms of provision of particular relevance to the participants in our research: apprenticeships and the various pre-vocational or 'employability' programmes aimed specifically at vulnerable young people. We also highlight some of the labour market experiences of those participants who became employed during the research.

The next three chapters present individual case studies of young people in our research who raise issues of particular interest in relation to the foregoing discussions. We begin with Danny, a young man who perhaps came closest to popular stereotypes of NEET young people. A former young offender, partly estranged from his mother and stepfather, and still engaged in criminal activity such as dealing in soft drugs, Danny resisted engagement in low-level vocational programmes and had strong views on what he saw as their poor quality. However, he saw the value of some forms of education and attempted to use training programmes to develop his literacy and numeracy skills, which he saw as his only hope for progression. By contrast, Hailey was academically successful but dropped out of education after becoming pregnant at the age of 16. Although receiving little support from the baby's father, Hailey aimed to return to education; nevertheless, there were difficulties to overcome and at times her future appeared precarious. Without her mother's intervention, and state support with childcare costs, it is likely

that Hailey would have remained NEET for considerably longer than she did. The third case study is of Sean, a young man who dropped out of a catering apprenticeship after experiencing what appeared to be exploitative working conditions. Like many other participants, Sean's experiences were made more complex by family poverty, and at times he also appeared at risk of sustained exclusion. Partly by chance, Sean obtained permanent employment with a restaurant chain, which provided security, reasonable working conditions and opportunities for progression. Sean thrived in this environment, and was still working there when our fieldwork ended.

Although selected for their relationship with education, training and employment, these three case studies also highlight the important influence of other factors, such as family poverty, local environments and early school experiences. Chapter 9 explores the background to these issues, focusing in particular on family backgrounds, neighbourhoods and schooling. Many participants had been in care or had difficult relationships with their families; a high proportion had experienced school exclusion, with almost inevitable impacts on their educational performance. These experiences, alongside the ways in which they are modified by gender and ethnicity, are discussed in relation to the research literature in these areas. The chapter also outlines young people's relationships with the welfare system and their experiences as benefit claimants.

Three further case studies illuminate the ways in which experiences of family, community and welfare interact with labour market participation. For Isla, chaotic experiences of the care system, followed by motherhood and ultimately losing custody of her child formed the backdrop to her struggles to obtain a hairdressing apprenticeship. Saheera, who was at school when the research began, married at 16 and remained NEET throughout our fieldwork. Her resistance to schooling and further education, as well as her identity as a maturing young person in her own right – and as well as a wife, mother and daughter – were shaped by the interactions of class, gender, ethnicity and family. Finally, Cayden – a young man with learning difficulties who simply wanted a job and a family life – illustrates the important but limited role that can be played by voluntary organizations, not only in supporting vulnerable young people but in providing them with work.

This book is about young people whose lives have been profoundly affected by social and economic change: directly, in terms of the contraction and limitation of employment opportunities in a few short years of recession and austerity; and also indirectly, as the outcome of