

# Variation in local career trajectories of young people sharing a similar low socio-economic background in one geographic community

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**This** paper uses a life history approach to examine the decision making of six young people around what to do when leaving compulsory education. They all share similar social backgrounds and are located in one geographic place – a deprived, working class, urban area in the English midlands – but the six individuals have opted to follow three different post-16 pathways, even though they all achieved GCSE qualifications that would have enabled them to enter further education, and therefore potentially higher education. These different post-16 routes include employment without formal training (the workers), employment with formal training (the apprentices) and studying in higher education (the students). All the participants (and their families) are historically ‘rooted’ in the local area and this paper explores the influence of the social learning that takes place within local communities of practice – in the form of friendship groups, families and school communities – on the young people’s different, yet all resolutely local, early career trajectories.



## Geographical location of the research: City as overarching community

This research seeks to locate decision-making within the geographical context of young people’s lives. Like many areas in the UK, the participants’ home city has seen the loss of much of its traditional industry. The decline of the mining and pottery industries in particular has had a marked effect on the city. This downturn is likely to have taken place after the

majority of the participants’ parents had left school. Thus, the participants’ parents’ decisions around what to do when they themselves left school may have taken place in a very different economic climate to the one facing their children – one in which jobs were more readily available and, moreover, ones that did not require high level academic qualifications.

At the time the participants in this study were at secondary school, educational attainment in the city was lower than the national average, but improving. Local post-16 staying on rates for full-time education and higher education were also both lower than the national average, while rates for work-based training were higher. There was also evidence of tension between, on the one hand, the drive to raise achievement and skill levels and, on the other hand, local perceptions around the qualification demands of employers in the area. These issues formed the wider backdrop against which participants in this study would be making decisions around career pathways.

## Theorising young people’s post-16 decision making

The association between socio-economic background and decision-making about trajectories after compulsory schooling is relatively well researched (Forsyth and Furlong, 2000, 2003; Connor, 2001). However, this research does not account well for variation in decision-making among young people from the same background. Hodkinson and colleague’s work (1996, 1997, 2004, 2008) has been developed into a theory of career decision-making, which involves three elements (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997):

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1. Decisions are pragmatically rational within an individual's horizons for action;
2. They are influenced by interactions with others which are related to unequal resources different individuals possess;
3. They are located within a series of turning points throughout an individual's life course.

They argue that an individual's horizons for action are determined by external opportunities and their own subjective perceptions, which are influenced by the opportunities they have access to and also by their sense of self. Within this framework, decision-making does not fit neatly into a rational process of choice but is based upon partial information, emotional and tacit preferences as much as upon logic and any rational assessment of possible returns. This paper suggests that geography is a significant element of an individual's horizons for action and is implicated in the participants' decision-making.

This paper focuses on the family, peers and schooling as intersecting communities, which shape individuals' life experience and act as 'sites' or 'places' where young people's self-efficacy can be developed or restricted. Parents, for example, influence the

development of self-efficacy by providing opportunities for mastery experiences and promoting certain values and standards (Bandura, 1997, 2001). Similarly, schools may influence self-efficacy development through aspects of practice such as ability setting and particular teaching approaches (Bandura, 1977, 1986; Locke and Latham, 1990).

If parents, peers and schooling form part of an individual's social geography it makes sense to consider ways of investigating formative aspects of the social context for the experience of learning. A community of practice is defined as a shared social practice, which is located within a specific cultural context and may reflect values inherent within that culture (Wenger, 1998). Decisions over post-16 pathways may depend upon the nature of the relationship between communities of practice, disposition towards learning and self-efficacy.

## Methods and sample information

The stories of six young people have been drawn on in this paper: two HE students, two apprentices

**Table 1: Selected participant information**

Participant	Local post-16 status	Age	GCSE achievement	Academic ability group at secondary school (set position)	Family background	
					Mother	Father
Hailey	HE student	21	10 – 11 'all good grades'	Top	Pottery worker	Miner
Harry	HE student	19	A grade Maths plus 7 others	Top	Tailor	Retired mechanic
Anna	Apprenticeship	20	1 B, 4 or 5 Cs including Maths, 3 Ds	Lower	Full-time carer (ex-veterinary receptionist)	Retail – works in lighting shop
Adam	Apprenticeship	20	2Bs, 1C, 2Ds, E plus 3 others he is unsure of grade	Lower	Mother left family when Adam was 6 years old.	Coded welder – power stations
Wenona	Working in administration	19	C grade English, remainder Ds – perception that she underachieved because of mental well-being problems.	Lower	Senior carer - Care home	Plasterer
Wendy	Working in administration	19	All Bs + 2 Cs	Top	Housewife	Retail – works in mother's shop

and two workers. All six lived locally all their lives, as had the majority of their parents. Five participants were White; Wenona was of Pakistani origin. All had achieved sufficient academic qualifications to render progression to further full time study and, therefore, HE a possibility (see Table 1). They each took part in an individual, semi-structured interview, which ranged in length from 40 to 60 minutes.

## Findings

This paper focuses on young people's decision-making around what to do when leaving compulsory education. Within this decision-making they are making a judgement about their ability to succeed in and the desirability of further learning. Other issues may come into play in making this judgment. For example, what opportunities do they think further learning will offer? What value do they place on different outcomes of learning? Leaving school also opens up the prospect of moving to a new environment and becoming part of a different community of practice. Other questions that may arise therefore relate to what sort of communities of practice do they associate with different post-16 pathways and to what extent do they consider membership essential to success?

### The HE Students

Hailey's parents split up when she was 5 and as a result she moved with her mother and sister to a large council estate in one of the most deprived wards in the city. She felt that her family were different to other families living there. One of the ways in which they were different was the emphasis they placed on academic achievement.

When we moved to [name of area] we lived on the council estate and I did feel as if...we didn't want no trouble we just wanted to get on with our lives, have a good education, mind our own business. Whereas there was a lot of drugs going on...and we didn't want to get involved in that. So really in a way we did feel out of place as if we shouldn't really be there.

Although happy at primary school her transfer to secondary school did not go well. She attributed this to her separation from her friends in class and the style of teaching although she was placed in the top

sets. Her mother removed her from the school and she enrolled at an alternative secondary school in the area.

At 16 Hailey moved to a sixth form college outside the city. While she felt the school encouraged students to go to the school's sixth form, she also felt that its main focus was on those 'who did well'. She was clear on the implications of this in terms of students' future directions.

**Int:** Do you think everyone was encouraged to stay on or was it different for other students?

**Hailey:** ...it must have been really hard for the ones who were in the lower sets and didn't do so well. Although we had a careers service in school...I think personally it should have been essential for them to go and see them...whereas it was optional it should have been essential for them to go and plan their next move. Because really once they'd left school they were kind of on their own and they'd got no support or anything. It was just kind of up to them then what they did and they...a lot didn't have the grades to go to 6th form or college so it kind of...

**Int:** Because you sound as if you didn't really have much of decision...

**Hailey:** That's it, I just saw it as there was no choice really. That was what I was doing and I wanted to carry on through education.

While Hailey enjoyed learning generally, an important factor was that a degree was a route to a 'good' job. When she left college Hailey progressed to a local post-1992 university, the first in her family to attend HE, where she graduated with a degree in Psychology, Sport and Exercise. At the time of the interview Hailey was still working in the job she had worked in while at university (receptionist at a leisure club) but looking for a degree-level job. Hailey had found it difficult to find employment locally, something she attributed to the lack of graduate level jobs in the area. Those that were available required her to commute relatively long distances or move away from the city, something she was very reluctant to do.

Harry's father's family had lived in the same area for a

number of generations. His mother moved to the area when she was five years old and had lived there since. Like Hailey, he felt that his family had higher values than other families living in his immediate community. Like Hailey, Harry also had a relatively strong interest in getting 'a good job' and achieving a high income but his interest and passion for music took precedence. He felt he had 'always wanted to go to university'. Harry attributed this attitude in part to his father's wish for him to have opportunities that were denied to him.

On leaving school Harry attended a local further education college where he completed a BTEC in Music Technology; an experience he enjoyed, getting on well with lecturers and other students. At the time of the interview Harry was part way through a degree course (Music Technology and Management) at his local post-1992 university. However, he was not particularly enjoying this experience, because the majority of the students on the course were 'posh' and not from the local area. He found it hard to mix with the other students and was regularly missing lectures.

## The Apprentices

Anna lived with her parents and younger brother who was severely disabled. Her parents had always lived locally and the family live in the same house her mother had grown up in. While Anna's family placed a strong emphasis on 'working hard' this was in a general sense rather than specifically in relation to education:

We [the family] all work. We all go out to work for what we do...we haven't got idle-itus...They [parents] would say get off your backside and do something or else...My mum's got no time for wasters.

Like Hailey and Harry, Anna felt that many other families in her immediate community did not share the same values. When she left school Anna enrolled on an apprenticeship scheme working as a nursery nurse at a local FE college, something she arranged herself without help from the school. Anna's reasons for this route were her fondness of children and her experience of caring for her brother, which had contributed to a sense of being extremely capable in a caring role. This expertise had been validated by professional staff at the hospital and was highly valued by her family. She also felt indebted for the care her

brother had received and wanted to 'give something back'.

Anna's decision to look for a local apprenticeship had been influenced by her perception that, because of her particular life experience, she was more mature than the typical college student:

I never wanted to go to college and do a full-time course. I wanted to go to work. And if I didn't get my GCSEs I would have had to have gone to college. And I didn't want that. I wanted to be a bit independent. Meet new people. I know I would have met new people at college but if you're at work...I had to grow up and didn't want to meet people who were a bit immature for me. People say I'm old headed, but I had to be.

Adam attended the same Catholic high school as his father. Apart from sport, he did not enjoy school and reported wider discipline issues at the school with some students becoming involved in drugs. Adam was very quiet, his main interest throughout school was sport, which he believed he was talented at.

Adam had always wanted to work in a PE related career but felt that the prospects within the local area in this regard were poor. He did not particularly like academic learning and felt that while there were a number of opportunities for people who continued in this type of learning, he did not want to go down this route himself unless it was in a topic he was really interested in and felt the local employment prospects would be good. As a result he felt his options were limited; while he valued qualifications, those obtained through academic learning were less valuable to him:

**Int:** So would you have aimed to have gone into a job that had training involved in some way or any sort of job?

**Adam:** No, I would have tried to get one with training.

**Int:** Why's that?

**Adam:** Because it's got more opportunities to go on to bigger and better things...for certain people they told them they could have this option of staying on or going to college. But with

what I wanted to do there was nothing really.

**Int:** So certain people got this option?

**Adam:** Like people who wanted to stay on at the 6th form and do the subjects that were available there.

**Int:** So they got more information?

**Adam:** Yeah.

**Int:** So what did you want to do?

**Adam:** I wanted to go into engineering.

**Int:** On an apprenticeship?

**Adam:** Well, I didn't know that the apprenticeship existed. I didn't get any information off the school or advisors at the school or anything like that.

Unsure of what he wanted to do, Adam left school but received a telephone call from the local FE college and through them obtained an apprenticeship. He has since completed a BTEC and is partway through a second which will provide him with entry to a Foundation Diploma and hopefully a degree.

## The Workers

Wendy's family had lived locally for a number of generations and her large extended family were well known in the area. She attended her local secondary school, the same one all her family had gone to, but while she had enjoyed primary school she did not feel the same way about secondary school. She experienced a lot of problems settling, feeling 'lost' and frightened: '[I] couldn't see anyone I knew...I dreaded school for the first two years'. Few of her primary school friends transferred to her secondary school and Wendy found it difficult to break into existing groups as many of her classmates had transferred from a different primary school. Her problems settling into school affected her confidence, which in turn had implications for her educational achievement and her ability to develop new friends.

This was something she took into consideration when

making decisions about her future. Instead of entering college, something that she had discussed with her family, she elected to continue working.

**Int:** So you went straight into the kennels you were working at when you were still at school?

**Wendy:** Yeah, work experience I started. I did both my two weeks there. But in the two weeks they offered me a weekend job as well... and when I left they asked me if I wanted a permanent job. Which was 6 days a week, Monday to Saturday.

**Int:** So did you think that was the easiest option for you at the time?

**Wendy:** Yeah...I knew the people there and I was comfy, enjoyed it...I got into work and I wasn't bothered about college after that.

However, Wendy was not particularly settled at work as her current employer was closing down. She talked of wanting to take part in more formal learning to obtain more qualifications to 'prove' to potential employers that she had got ability. Although she felt that she was more confident now, her past experience continued to make her cautious about exposing herself to situations or challenges she perceived as threatening.

Wenona's father had always lived in the local area, but her mother had moved to England from Pakistan for her marriage. Wenona had a large extended family living close by. Unlike most of the other participants' families, Wenona's attempted to select a secondary school and entered her for the entrance examination for a local independent school. However, she did not pass this examination. As a result she went on to attend 'the last option', the closest secondary school to her home, the same one her father had attended.

Wenona said her parents had a positive attitude towards her school, and were keen that she should go to college. Wenona did well at school and progressed to a sixth form college in the city where she wanted to study IT. However, a family visit to Pakistan led to Wenona starting college late and she found that she did not enjoy the course and felt unable to make friends. After attending for two weeks she made the



decision to leave despite knowing this would meet with disapproval from her family.

Following this Wenona did not work or engage in any further study for a year; a period that was very difficult for her. She began an online course 'but didn't even finish that' and her confidence decreased. Through family connections, she found an administrative job in a local ceramic retail warehouse. She works in an office with a small group of women and is very happy there. She is currently studying for an NVQ in Administration alongside her colleagues and, while not discounting further learning, said she would only do so as part of this same group.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has sought to provide the social geography within which the participants' perceptions of learning and decision-making have developed. It has focused on their school experience and notions of the value of learning. Although the majority of the participants came from a background, which would be categorised as working class, it is clear from their narratives that this term had more than one meaning for them. They appeared to position themselves and their families in relation to other working class families, as well as families perceived as being more advantaged. For the Apprentices in particular, being working class frequently related to being in paid employment, being 'in work' and coming from a family that had 'always worked'. The HE Students and the Workers, however, indicated that their parents also emphasised doing well at school in terms of their future.

Across all three groups there was a relatively high degree of consensus in how they talked about school generally. For example, they associated a student's 'school set' position with ability and class, they felt that clever students had a better relationship with teachers and also stayed on or progressed to a sixth form college and from there to university. As a result of these factors, there were clear differences between the groups in terms of how they talked about their own school experience. The HE Students and Wenona appeared to have a more positive perception of this. Their narratives are of wanting to do well, rather than to simply 'get through'. Similarly, they give more examples of getting on well with teachers. The

perceptions of the Apprentices were less positive in that their focus was on the social aspect of schooling rather than learning, of just 'getting through'.

All the participants achieved at least 1 C grade at GCSE, many considerably higher than this. They were all, therefore, technically capable of progressing to further study and, potentially entering higher education. Their views of this as a potential option varied considerably, however. Given that all participants expressed a wish to remain in the local area, this view is also shaped by their perceptions of the local community and labour market; both of which have been particularly adversely affected by the current economic climate. The HE Students clearly valued this route over other alternatives and felt that possession of a degree would be a valuable asset in terms of their ability to enter a career locally. The Apprentices, however, felt that work-based learning offered better prospects in terms of employment because academic qualifications were of little value locally. While the Workers shared a greater degree of similarity with the HE Students in terms of the value of further full-time learning, both appeared to be particularly influenced by their parent's views on this.

The participants in this study began school with certain perceptions about themselves and about learning. This shaped their schooling experience in that other students and school staff may have viewed them in a particular way and they may have had different relationships with both. Their schooling experience may, in turn, have influenced and shaped their self-perceptions about themselves as a learner or about learning. Despite the similarities in background, the participants had very different perceptions of their schooling experience and different views on learning itself. This paper has demonstrated the role their family, school and community have played in shaping these perceptions.

This study suggests that the beginnings of post-16 decision-making processes are located early in the life course and that the decisions young people make at 16 may be more of an outward expression of this process; a formality rather than a 'turning point'. Although the participants in this study achieved at least the minimum qualifications to enable them to progress to further study and thereby meet HE entry

requirements, only those pupils identified as 'bright' by the school appeared to have been considered 'HE material' – by the school, other pupils, their parents and the participants themselves. This may effectively polarise young people at a relatively early age and have a negative effect on the effort they subsequently put into academic learning and ultimately the level of qualification they achieve.

This process may also influence the type of information, advice and guidance schools provide. Given the recent policy changes, which have placed responsibility for the provision of impartial IAG on schools, this issue may become an increasingly significant one. This study suggests that those pupils who are not considering, or who are not expected by the school to stay on may receive less information on alternative pathways. Conversely those who are considered 'bright' may not receive information about other options for further progression in learning, for example, more vocationally orientated or work-based routes. As a result they may not be making informed decisions. Higher education may not be the right pathway for every pupil identified as 'bright' and this may result in them making poor choices and ultimately 'dropping out' of HE which may impact negatively on their self-perceptions (Quinn et al, 2005).

If horizons are limited to the local labour market the nature of that market may limit aspirations. If local jobs are not perceived as requiring academic qualifications then the incentive to enter HE may be lower. Low geographical mobility is associated with low social mobility and individuals have to balance their attachment to the local against a desire to obtain a career. For the HE students the ability to enter a more highly paid career had been a significant factor in their decision to progress to HE and they had specifically balanced their choice of degree with their perceptions around the employment opportunities this would offer locally. This suggests that in relation to young people from lower socio-economic groups like the participants in this study, the drive to widen participation may need to be more closely linked to local labour markets.

The impact of the local area is also evident in relation to the schools these participants attended. The issues that these schools face because of their location in

an area of higher than average disadvantage have clearly impacted upon participants' school experience in that many of the schools in the area have levels of achievement that fall below the national average. Similarly, progression into further formal learning post-16 and higher education are low compared to other areas. However, a number of the participants in this study appeared to 'buck' the trend of the school they attended. Both Harry and Wenona, for example, attended schools performing below local and national averages but went on to achieve at a level high enough to progress to further formal learning. Harry and Hailey also appeared to be amongst the minority progressing to higher education from their respective schools. The data generated by this research, then, offers support for the view that other factors, such as self-efficacy, can moderate the effect of attending a lower achieving school. On the one hand, the findings from this study indicate that schooling experience may help to encourage and support aspirations in some working class pupils. For others, however, it may play a part in building that gap. Moreover, the findings indicate that this gap may begin to develop at a relatively early age, which raises issues about the success of strategic interventions that aim to move away from the notion of young people being fixed into post-16 pathways early on in their school life.

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