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## **Young people in the middle: pathways, prospects, policies and a new agenda for youth research**

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### **Abstract**

*Recent decades have seen important changes in education to work transitions in the UK. For secondary and further education leavers there are extensive challenges in accessing jobs with prospects. Recently, policy makers have renewed their focus on this middle grouping who are not bound for HE or NEET. However, there is a relative paucity of research into the experiences of these young people and surprisingly little youth researcher engagement with vocational pathways and their framing in policy. The paper interrogates changing experiences and opportunity 'in the middle' and linked policy framings and interventions. Policy remains framed in individualising terms which focus on young people's capacities and positions them, and represents their interests, in very specific ways. School mediated employer engagement is an interesting exemplar here and is contrasted with alternative interventions which seek to restructure opportunities more fundamentally. The paper argues for a new agenda for youth research which would hold a mirror to experiences in the middle, critically interrogate assumptions embedded in policy and practice and enhance understanding of differentiated pathways and prospects for young people.*

*Key words: youth research, missing middle, employer engagement, labour market inequalities, transition, vocational policy*

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## 1. Introduction

The relationship between education and employment has become more variegated and more complex to navigate over the last forty years. The demand for young labour has declined and access to, and progress within, early employment have become more problematic for many young people (Green 2017, Heinz 2009). Sociologists have documented change in the objective circumstances and subjective experiences of youth, the rise in precarity and difficulties securing jobs with prospects especially amongst school and college leavers (Furlong 2009, Roberts 2009). Young people's diverse and, on the surface, individualised biographical pathways remain strongly patterned, shaped by structural processes and marked by class inequalities (Macdonald and Shildrick 2018, Furlong 2009). Evidence points to a sharpening of such inequalities as the possibility of success has become more contingent on academic qualifications acquired ahead of entry to the labour force (Machin et al 2018). Youth researchers interested in education and labour market transitions have tended to focus on young people pursuing higher education or those not in education, training or employment (NEET) and there is a relatively limited social science evidence base relating to the so-called missing middle, the forty to fifty percent of youth cohorts who do not progress to HE nor become the focus of NEET policy concern (Roberts 2019, Roberts and Macdonald 2013, Roberts 2011). Research into vocational pathways tends to be published in vocational education journals and broader youth and transition research has not engaged very extensively with this literature nor with government post-16 policy and practice surrounding young people's school and college transitions to the labour market. There is generally a quite limited evidence base around the education to employment pathways of young adults with lower and mid-level qualifications and in respect of progression opportunities at the lower end of the labour market (Lloyd and Payne 2011, Hawking 2019, Sissons et al 2016; Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2016). Whilst there is extensive data on employers' views on education leaver skills (eg. Kashfekdel et al 2018) there is relatively little social science research into recruitment practices (Keep 2012). In short, the shrinking of mid-level opportunities in work and the policy framing of school and college leavers' employment pathways are accompanied by significant gaps in social science evidence.

This paper focuses on young people 'in the middle', particularly school and FE college leavers, and the opportunities which they confront. Concerns about an 'overlooked middle' who do not access HE and generally avoid severe disadvantage has been something of a recurring theme in youth studies over the decades. In the 1980s it was argued that labour

market restructuring had created problems not just for those at the margins but for less remarked upon groupings in the middle, the ‘ordinary kids’ identified by Jenkins (1983) and Brown (1987). Manufacturing, skilled manual work and routine office roles had been common destinations for working class young men and women and their decline from the late 1970s onwards undermined traditional transitions for this group. Over the next two decades or so, and perhaps in light both of significant growth in HE and rising policy concern about NEET young people, researchers tended to follow these important trends and focus much less on experiences and outcomes for ordinary kids on middling pathways (Macdonald 2011; Roberts 2013). This changing youth research lens may have also partly reflected declining labour market opportunities amongst the middle group along with a tendency to focus on advantaged/disadvantaged dichotomies (Furlong et al 2018). From the 2010s in particular youth researchers have emphasised value in revisiting the overlooked middle not just as a gap to be redressed but a call to better discern the lived experiences and disequalising consequences of the changing opportunity structure: a *“broader lens [allows] us to better identify and even address the ways social inequality manifests in the lives of those who ...might appear to be ‘getting by’”* (Roberts and MacDonald 2013: 1.4). This is especially important in the current context where young people with low and middling qualifications channel into a polarising labour market with fewer mid-level jobs and progression opportunities than in the past (Roberts 2013).

In this review I argue for a more extensive analysis of the processes that frame young people’s trajectories from school and college into and within the labour market. This requires us to engage with an extraordinarily busy domain of policy and practice as successive governments have designed and re-designed policies to boost training, skills and pathways to work. It is important to bring this within the purview of youth research, to understand the complex evolution of transitions, pathways and prospects of school and college leavers seeking jobs and to interrogate the everyday logics and enactments of policy and practice which influence young people's experiences and decision making. In the English national policy context such policies and practices are characterised by an almost obsessive concern with labour supply or with more efficient matching of supply and demand. Such logics gain traction within a set of labour market policy framings and a denuded institutional structure which make alternative solutions difficult to pursue (Keep and James 2012). I will explore some of these difficulties and take school mediated employer engagement research and policy claims as an interesting exemplar of current policy common sense about effective

intervention. I then briefly consider alternative framings of supporting young people into employment. Youth research can make a very important contribution in this under-researched middle through fuller engagement with vocational and technical education pathways, critically informing or challenging assumptions embedded in policy and practice and analysing related inequalities and their reproduction. In the current context of Brexit, questions about skills shortage and the extensive vulnerability of young people to Covid-19 furlough, lay-off and recruitment freeze (Henehan 2020) these agendas have a particularly pressing relevance.

## **2. Young people's pathways to work and structural problems 'in the middle'**

Macdonald and Shildrick (2018: 84) argue that "*(if we are accurately to make sense of youth transitions we need to lift our gaze, from the characteristics of young people and the minutiae of the twists and turns of their transitions, and 'look up' to the opportunity structures that prevail for them and the social, economic and political forces that shape these conditions*". Youth researchers have not ignored wider demand side processes but these have often been painted with broad brushstrokes, the context of young people's orientations or decision making or, like recruitment and labour market processes, under-examined (Keep 2012, Roberts 2018). In section 3 I consider some policy and practice assumptions which surround middle pathways from school and further education (FE) college to the labour market. Here I briefly document some changes in labour market structures particularly as they confront young people seeking employment on leaving school or college.

The continuing trend to extended full time education was consolidated by the formal raising of the educational leaving age to 18 in 2015 (DfE 2018). Despite the implementation of loan based fees of £9k pa from 2012 in England, higher education participation rates have followed a secular rise to reach one in three 18 year olds being accepted onto a university place in 2017 (ONS 2018a). A more educated workforce does not automatically create more skilled jobs. For example, without commensurate growth in employment demand, large graduate cohorts crowd out less qualified job seekers (Clegg 2017, Brown 2013). From 1991 to 2014 there was a rise from 15% to 45% in the share of graduates in managerial and associate professional occupations, and a change from a negligible presence in administrative occupations to a 21% graduate share (Holmes and Mayhew 2015). Across many mid- and lower level jobs there has been an attenuation of internal labour markets, a flattening of

hierarchies and outsourcing alongside the ‘cascading down of graduate labour’ (Keep and James 2012; see also Lloyd and Payne 2011). There has been a shrinking number of middle level skill jobs at skilled manual and intermediate administrative levels (Peugny 2019). These developments diminish the opportunities which were available to prior labour market entry cohorts of young adults. Changing structures of employment demand have undermined the prospects of young adults on middle pathways who find themselves squeezed and at greater risk than earlier generations (Resolution Foundation 2018).

Youth research has, in recent decades, focused on polarised youth transitions, leaving evidence gaps relating to the middle groupings who confront these labour market squeezes (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2016). We cannot map ‘middle’ qualifications precisely onto labour force trajectories but it is worth noting that in 2018 in England 84% of 19 year olds had achieved level 2 qualifications (5 GCSEs at grades A\*-to C, or 9-4, or equivalent) and 60% overall had achieved 2 or more A levels or equivalent (that is level 3) vocational qualifications (DfE 2019), the level needed for university entry. Approximately 40% of 19 year olds are in higher education (Brant 2019). Hidden behind these summary figures is significant diversity, illustrated by for example Playford and Gayle’s (2016) exploration of moderate GCSE attainers, or growing and differential rates of drop out in pursuing level 3 courses (Whittaker 2020). What happens to school and FE college leavers seeking full time work? Schoon and Lyons-Amos (2016) draw on evidence from BHPS and UKHLS data to look at early career pathways for two cohorts of young people (aged 17-23) entering the labour market from 1996 onwards. The authors argue for a ‘diverse pathways’ characterisation of young adults’ transitions in order to capture complexity and change ‘in the middle’. Their five clusters or pathway types include two significant groupings which fall between extended (university) education and persistent unemployment /inactivity. These middle groupings entered work directly after leaving school or college with most doing so by the age of 19 and accounted for 55% of the (1980-84) birth cohort and 41% of the 1985-9 born cohort, with a decline in the early, 16 and 17 year old, work route (Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2016). The authors strongly advocate for a more differentiated understanding of youth pathways which better captures diversity and complexity across the cohort as a whole. It is also important to note that the ‘groupings’ have blurred edges. For example, in his analysis of NEET and educational marginality Thompson (2017) describes how low level training may render young people seemingly safe from NEET yet prove dead-end as young people churn between training and low quality jobs. I focus on non-graduate pathways and prospects in this

review but it is important to also acknowledge an economic blurring at the middle / graduate end of the spectrum. For example, a degree is beneficial and associated with significant lifetimes earnings premia but this average hides significant diversity with up to one fifth of graduates estimated to be economically less advantaged over their lifetime as compared to how they would have fared had they not gone to university (Britton et al 2020). The middle, then, embraces a wide range of social circumstances, qualification levels and prospects.

Many challenges confront young adults on middle pathways. Education leaver qualifications are increasingly high stakes since there are limited chances to recover a poor start or pursue a work based route to a decent employment career (George et al 2015). The sectors which have become numerically more important recruiters of young workers, such as caring, retail and hospitality, have a preponderance of lower paying jobs and limited progression opportunities (TUC 2018, Tait and Harrop 2018). For younger people relative pay is traditionally significantly lower than for older employees (Mason and Salverda 2010) but there has also been a secular decline here and a stalling of biographical earnings progression (Irwin 1995, Gardiner and Gregg 2017, TUC 2018). Gardiner and Gregg (2017) show that this stalling is now driven by a fall in starting pay, reduced job moves by those in work and declining returns to staying with an employer. Many stick with jobs for which they are overqualified. This ‘stuck at the start’ (TUC 2018) pattern, driven by stasis in work rather than movement or churn, is an important but under-researched component of young people’s early labour force experience.

Despite long standing problems with labour demand and opportunity, successive UK governments have stressed the importance of young people’s education, skills and raising aspirations, all part of an agenda which purports to support social mobility. Youth researchers have been scathing about discourses and policies which imply deficiencies in young people themselves or in their families. Many argue the illogic of seeking to raise aspirations given these are already well in excess of realisable opportunities (eg. Avis and Atkins 2017). Recent vocational and technical education policies reflect a renewed and urgent emphasis by government intent on improving vocational and technical pathways and status and conjointly tackling current and anticipated skills shortages (HM Government 2017). There has been a quite limited sociological engagement with the government skills agenda and the array of policies and practices which seek to support young people into the labour market. However, this domain opens onto an important set of conceptual and practical policy questions which have wide relevancies for youth research.

### **3. Social policies for the ‘rediscovered’ middle**

In 2011, lambasting the failings of policies for young people not pursuing academic and A level routes and the proliferation of lower level vocational qualifications, Wolf (2011) stated that up to one third of the cohort of 16 – 19 years olds gained little to no benefit from the post-16 education system. The Coalition Government implemented extensive changes (DfE 2015) and under the subsequent Conservative Government vocational and technical education, training and skills policies were given further momentum by concerns about skills shortages, the new industrial strategy and the consequences of Brexit (HM Government 2017; City and Guilds 2019). Government commissioned reports and policy announcements over recent years have reflected a growing concern that English vocational and technical education and training holds a poor fit with evolving national economic and employment priorities and is under-performing (Wolf 2011; Sainsbury et al 2016). A rapid succession of policy initiatives have followed as new administrations and ministers sought new ways of tackling long standing problems (Keep and James 2012; Norris and Adam 2017) and the government ‘rediscovered’ the value of enhancing vocational education and raising its reputational standing. A sometimes preferred terminology of technical and professional education itself flags a desire to move away from the long standing English cultural devaluation of vocational education (Sainsbury 2016, see also The Edge Foundation 2018). In an echo of academic accounts of the missing middle, the 2016 House of Lords Select Committee on Social Mobility focused on ‘the overlooked and left behind’ majority of young people, arguing that as successive governments have focused on HE and on NEET young people this ‘missing majority’ has been under-served by policy makers (House of Lords 2016, see also Hodgson and Spours 2013). However the UK context for effecting meaningful change is inauspicious. Any broader institutional contexts which might incentivise employers or support a coherent skills strategy have been undermined with the demise of coordinating bodies and a growing array of discrete players in a market for training (Keep 2016). There is enormous complexity at play. In recent decades governments have pursued market mechanisms to coordinate different interests. The 1980s saw the implementation of a quasi-market for independent training providers who took over work from FE providers and sought placements with employers (Unwin 2010). Assessment and often training itself was done by providers and employers’ training provision has declined (Fuller and Unwin 2009; Gambin and Hogarth 2016). Employers have become more distanced from training and recent decades have seen them positioned not as investors in training but as consumers such that:



*"(t)he notion of a detached customer who simply purchase 'training' much as they might purchase office cleaning services... is one that has developed in official policy for the last 30 years "* (Keep, 2012: 25)

Alongside the decline of manufacturing employment in the UK and expansion of service sector employment successive governments have promoted a supply side approach to upskilling. This is especially relevant in thinking about how young people are positioned within policy assumptions and mechanisms. From 1997 onwards New Labour promoted education as the key driver in its knowledge economy policies and its belief this could also deliver social mobility objectives. There was a very significant emphasis on increasing higher education participation rates and much less interest in intermediate skills policies (Unwin 2010). A significant political momentum was achieved by a model centred on educational supply rather than an industrial and employment strategy. For Keep and James (2012: 223) *"..given the broad range of labour market and economic interventions regarded as ideologically impossible and unacceptable, skills represents the bulk of the policy 'space' that is left"*, a pattern which continues to frame contemporary thinking and policy. The policy faith has been vested in a belief in 'supply push' where increasing the pool of qualified labour engenders a shift to higher value-added business models by employers or proves attractive to overseas investors (Lloyd and Mayhew 2010; Payne 2009). The model has been roundly critiqued, for example it offers no incentives to employers to enhance job quality nor any momentum to utilise skills more effectively (eg. Keep 2012, Payne 2009, 2016, Lloyd and Mayhew 2012; Dobbins and Plows 2017, Dromey et al 2017, Green et al 2016). In the UK context, employers can offer low paid dead end jobs without cost in a context where 22% of all jobs require no education beyond compulsory schooling (Keep 2016). Skill under-utilization runs at 30% in the UK (OECD cited by Keep 2016). In the absence of demand side changes or different ways of working, the policy emphases on supply side solutions oozes contradiction.

Recent administrations have moved to rebalance the narrow emphasis on supply side policies towards expanding the role of employers in skill reforms (Payne 2018). On the face of it, this might suggest that social scientists' insistence on the importance of labour market demand is hitting home. However, policies seeking to leverage employer buy-in have proved problematic (eg. Huddleston and Laczic 2018). Recent core initiatives have included the goal of 3 million apprenticeships by 2020 (House of Commons Education Committee 2015, and pledged in the 2017 Conservative party manifesto, although later dropped) and the roll out of

Technical ('T') levels in 2020 (Sainsbury Report 2016, Foster and Powell 2019). Through the Apprenticeship Levy the government sought to incentivise employers to become more proactive trainers (Powell 2019). As predicted by many, the ambitious numerical target backfired (Newton et al 2019, Richmond 2018), indeed apprenticeship numbers declined. Many employers saw the levy as complex and/or as a tax to write off. There is also evidence of very extensive re-badging of training: two thirds of apprentices have been described as 'conversions' of existing employees (Fuller et al 2017) and non-completion rates are high (Newton et al 2019; Richmond 2018). Technical or T levels are designed to be a two year alternative to A levels, offer a route to HE or employment and significantly improve the technical education offer available to young people. Organised around 15 different occupational routes, they seek to bring coherence, industry buy in and reputational standing to technical education. The first ones (digital, construction and education/childcare) are due to be implemented from September 2020, with more to follow in 2021, and will involve classroom learning and at least 45 days industry placement, a requirement which has raised concerns about employer capacity to deliver this, now much exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis (FE Week 2020).

The Conservative Government additionally sought to strengthen links between education and employment through its careers strategy (DfE 2017), engaging employers and other stakeholders in boosting careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) to help address the skills gap and boost productivity. Young people were widely seen to have poor information or understanding of the world of work and very limited information about available labour market opportunities (Long and Hubble 2019). Employers have been enjoined to do more through involvement in the school based delivery of CIAG, offering work experience placements and developing or contributing to more work-related learning by children in school, visiting schools, running talks, mentoring, hosting visits and involving themselves in curricular activities such as project based learning (DfE 2017). The aim has been to ensure more informed decision making by school and college students, to improve their careers knowledge and to enhance their soft skills and awareness of employers' perspectives and practices. This is a very busy area of policy and practice. It links with common sense views of more effectively matching labour supply to local employer demand (Payne 2018, Sissons and Jones 2016) seeking to engender a larger role for employers in skills development and guidance through school mediated interactions with young people. Although employer engagement is a narrow policy space it offers an interesting window onto

assumptions about how best to support young people into employment, and the role of employers and intermediaries in the increasingly problematic domain of education to work transitions (cf. Strathdee 2005). Both the practice and claims about the economic value of employer engagement have gathered significant momentum. As such it is of particular interest for youth research because the activity feeds into, and potentially reinforces, everyday ideas about the purposes of education, the nature of valued employment skills and cultural beliefs about the responsibilities for their dispensation and acquisition. It is especially pertinent to the analysis of middle pathways with its core aims of strengthening school leavers' employment prospects. It is also of interest because research evaluations reveal significant evidence gaps. In particular, questions arise regarding how such interventions interact with pre-existing inequalities as well as the overall effectiveness of a model centred on better matching young people to extant – yet problematic - employment demand.

#### ***4. Supporting young people from school to work?***

##### ***4.1. Employer engagement, context and inequalities***

The domain of employer engagement provides an interesting case of how UK government policy seeks to support education-to-work transitions for young people. Connections between employers and the education system has a long policy history (Huddleston 2019), but recent policy has been framed with reference to links between employer engagement and subsequent productivity and social mobility (Percy and Tanner 2019). The UK Careers Strategy (DfE 2017: 35) asserts that “*..in a fast-changing economy, it is essential that we make school and work more closely connected than ever before so young people from all backgrounds have the knowledge, skills and experience to succeed in work*”. Employer engagement is differentiated from work based learning and from school based careers education: it is defined by Stanley, Mann and Archer (2014) as being driven or authorised by employers, and has acquired a momentum and presumption of value. For example the UK Careers Strategy emphasises a critical role for employers, providing work experience, running talks, workshops and business challenges (see also HM Government 2017). The premise is that effective employer engagement can enable young people to make more informed choices, smooth their transitions from school to work and contribute to a less ‘reproductive’ pattern of choice and decision making, particularly through supporting socially disadvantaged groups. Employer engagement may well hold value for children and youth,

adding breadth of learning opportunities in a world where schools are increasingly incentivised to focus so specifically on league table academic achievement outcomes (Kashefpakdel, Newton and Clark 2018). Further, employers often enter into employer engagement because they see it generally 'as a good thing' (Bimrose et al 2014) and of value for local community engagement. As part of a commitment to enhanced careers advice, improved awareness of available opportunities and curricular broadening it has clear value. For example it may broaden young people's sense of their options or knowledge about how to pursue desired outcomes or, in providing information and insight it may weaken classed and gendered norms. The focus of the following critical discussion, then, is with some of the policy and practice claims which have emerged regarding the nature of its economic value for young people.

The 2012 Government Industrial Strategy recommended employers should work with the newly created National Careers Service in order to strengthen links across schools and colleges and employers (Bimrose et al 2014). A growing interest in bringing schools and employers closer fed into the establishment by the Coalition Government of The Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) in 2015, to provide strategic coordination and to broker relationships between employers and educational institutions, to help boost the careers advice and guidance strategies of schools and colleges and to build connections between businesses and schools (DfE 2014). The CEC is a government funded but employer-led organisation. It developed the Employer Enterprise Network with Local Enterprise Partnerships and focused on expanding employer engagement in schools, activities which are seen to enhance young people's outcomes and link to opportunities for "*better skills alignment and improved productivity*" (Pye Tait Consulting 2017: 29). The Conservative Government announced funding to support interventions in areas of low social mobility under the Opportunity Area programme (HM Government 2017). Resources were allocated to the CEC to help prepare young people in disadvantaged circumstances to be better prepared for work (CEC 2019) by enabling schools, colleges and employers to support additional employer encounters for young people. CEC stress the value of employer engagement for less advantaged young people and see it as protecting against labour market exclusion and supporting social mobility (Percy and Tanner 2020). As such we might see this particular policy as focusing at the less advantaged end of 'the middle', seeking to boost employment connections for those more at risk, although employer engagement is seen as having broader value for all pupils.

Evidence from a small number of sources has been widely mobilised in assertions of the efficacy of employer engagement. For example, CEC (2018) draws on research from the Education and Employers Taskforce (Mann et al 2017) that shows young people who recall 4 or more meaningful employer encounters are 86% less likely to be NEET and can earn 22% more over their career as compared to peers who recall no employer engagement activities. CEC is not alone in asserting its value. The DfE (2017) points to the same evidence and proposes that every school should offer at least 7 such encounters with employers as this would exceed "*the four encounters demonstrated to have an impact on employment and earnings*" (DfE 2017: 11). Elsewhere, too, the same research base is mobilised, for example the CBI (2020) state that 4 or more workplace encounters at school offer significant benefits to young people. It is also drawn upon in the design of resources to support the activity (eg. Edge Foundation and NFER 2018). The evidence informs a policy and practice common sense belief and one which seems emblematic of the wider supply side focus on young people themselves. However, the evidence base does not clearly support the strong claims of its proponents regarding its impacts on young people's employment and mobility chances and such claims draw on a decontextualised understanding of process, outcome and employment opportunity.

In their influential study, Mann and Percy (2013) analysed data from a 2011 survey of young adults' (19-24) exploring their current circumstances and recall of employer contacts when they were in school and concluded that increased employer contact was associated with a significant wage premium. Controlling by socio-demographic differences including gender, age, ethnicity, highest qualification and geographical locale, they argued that there was a significant 4.5% wage increase, on average, per employer contact. Whilst the survey covered nearly 1000 individuals, it was a small subsample on which the 'four or more contact' wage premia claim rests. Mann and colleagues developed a further follow up survey in 2016, with a larger sample of 1744 young adults, aged 19 to 24. They explored young people's own views of what was and was not helpful through school in preparing them for the future, as well as seeking to quantify the value, to young people, of different kinds of employer encounter and their extent (Mann et al 2016; Kashefpakdel 2017). In this data set too there was evidence of a significant earnings premium, of around 16% where respondents both found employer engagement helpful in getting a job and had experienced 4 or more employer encounters in school. Again, this quite particular subsample should urge caution in interpretations of causal process. Parallel questions are taken up by Kashefpakdel and Percy

(2017) in their analysis of the 1970 British Cohort Study which tracked young people through their teenage years and twenties and collected evidence on careers activities in schools (then part of the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative). The analysis centres on external speaker careers talks in school and employment outcomes and reveals some, albeit modest, evidence of an earnings premium at age 26.

Critical of simplistic human capital models Mann and colleagues see explanatory value in enhanced social capital and the wage 'effect' is seen to stem from young people gaining "*insights of value to their future career progression*" (2013: 17); employer engagement helps them with career planning and matching up their own capabilities and employment opportunities. Mann, Kashefpakdel and Percy (2019) extended the BCS analysis to argue that the careers talks had a singular and significant wage effect for those who lacked 'real' social capital as teenagers, in contrast to those whose family or friends could help them find a job. Hughes and colleagues (2016) argue that networks enable positive transitions to work through the provision of more sufficient and trusted information to young people. Furthermore, networks may allow employers to draw on their connections with schools or use work experience 'pools' as recruitment channels (Massey 2014). Within a linear causal model – of interventions engendering protection from NEET or wage premia - it is not possible to see the contextual variation or diversity in how employer engagement relationships are working in practice. For example, in their study Kashefpakdel and Percy (2017) concluded that additional careers talks added value to young people's outcomes although this obtained only above 3 such talks and appeared to be most marked where there were multiple talks (eg. 15 and more across a year). This very high number itself seems to hint that an association may stem not from a simply additive model of employer encounters but a different kind of context or set of relationships in which such encounters occur, perhaps for example indicative of a recruitment channel. If evidence suggests multiple employer encounters can support young people into rewarding employment then it is crucial to understand the contexts in which they do so, and why (see also Buzzeo and Cifci, 2017). This is recognised by employer engagement researchers (eg. Kashefpakdel et al 2019) but it is the apparent causation running from interventions to wage premia, avoidance of NEET and enhanced social mobility which is mobilised in policy (DfE 2017, Percy and Tanner 2020).

It is worth reminding ourselves that the convenient summary index provided by wage premia is a particular framing for measures of success. Significant emphasis is placed on the economic value of employer encounters to young people but how far do young people

themselves value high earnings? Evidence shows that job satisfaction and security hold significantly greater value. In ranking job attributes 71% of young people in the 2016 UK Household Longitudinal Survey saw an interesting job as very important, 60% felt job security very important, time for family and helping others were next highest, with high income 5<sup>th</sup> ranked, with 25% valuing this as very important (ONS 2018b, on UKHLS data for 2016).

Wage premia is of course a shorthand as a measure of success, but success itself is framed in particular ways. Employer engagement activity puts a weight of responsibility for employment outcomes on individual employers and on schools and colleges. Employer organisations such as the CBI foreground its importance and the value of business engagement in schools for enhancing 'employability skills' through careers information, co-creating work readiness and developing character (CBI 2019). Furthermore, employers will often be more focused on short term and organisation specific concerns than by sectoral or longer term skills objectives. In the absence of an equivalent focus on employment demand and skills formation within the labour market we need to ask if the framing of skill in terms of individuals' employability, or compensated social capital, intensifies responsibility for improved employment outcomes onto individual young people themselves, schools and employers.

It is also important to ask how employer interventions relate to wider social inequalities and if they can realistically support disadvantaged young people, or give them an additional leg up or if, in practice, they end up reinforcing inequalities. Good information and support may influence young people's horizons of action (cf. Hodkinson et al 1996). The employer engagement evidence base offers some analysis of how interventions play out across different, particularly classed, groupings drawing on theories of human, social and cultural capital (Jones et al 2016). Social capital is seen to be especially relevant, for example the ability to benefit from trusted and relevant employment information, with employer links seen to boost the resources that young people can draw upon. However, despite the policy conviction that employer engagement can help less advantaged young people the evidence base is quite narrow and mixed (eg. Hughes et al 2016). Jones and colleagues (2016) provide several examples of stratifying effects in which more advantaged young people mobilise employer engagement experiences more effectively than do less advantaged. Evidence reveals strongly stratified access to work experience opportunities amongst young people, shaped through family networks (Hatcher and le Gallais 2008) and unequal benefits accrue to

careers advice in school where pupils' access, perseverance and gain are closely linked to their family background, resources and academic achievement levels (Moote and Archer 2018). It is of interest that the most significant impact of employer engagement for Mann and colleagues (2016) was amongst those who found them helpful in their applications to university. This hints that some young people may use their experiences in well crafted university or job applications, an ability known to particularly correlate with familial educational background and levels of support within school (cf. Huddleston et al 2014). Understanding if and how those on diverse non-graduate pathways draw value, or not, from employer engagement interventions and the contexts in which they do so, is an important yet under-evidenced question for research.

Employer engagement offers an interesting example of efforts to support young people from education to the labour market. In policy it has been framed as enhancing productivity and social mobility (DfE 2017, Percy and Tanner 2020). It has played into common sense arguments about how to effect better employment outcomes for school and college leavers (eg. CBI 2019). Employer engagement may widen the curriculum and broaden young people's awareness of employment opportunities. However, claims about enhancing employment opportunity and social mobility overstep the evidence base. Inserted into 'business as usual' arrangements, it is equally plausible that these interventions play into disqualifying processes. More generally, despite positioning employers more centrally, how to improve young people's outcomes is still framed in terms of compensating social capital and more efficiently matching young people and extant employment demand. In the next subsection I consider some alternative approaches where employment demand and the structure of opportunity are seen as integral to supporting young people's transitions to work.

#### **4.2. Skills development and shaping opportunity**

Employer engagement policies might alter the distribution of young people to job opportunities. Alternative models orient to leveraging more systemic changes in the nature of such opportunities. One set of approaches seeks to implement an expansive model of skills development in which qualifications and training are framed with reference to job design, effective skill utilisation and scope for progression. An example of this approach to the design and support of young people's pathways to, and within, work is described by Hodgson and colleagues (Hodgson and Spours 2015, Hodgson et al 2017, 2019). Here a collaborative



engagement across stakeholders was very closely tied to specific sectoral skills needs and development (Hodgson et al 2019). Other models and practices have been developed at a local level in the context of regional devolution in the UK with a focus on structures of demand, opportunity and reward, skill development and progression opportunities within work (eg. Green et al 2016). For example, local authorities have sought positive social value outcomes through commissioning and procurement policies which specify targets around local recruitment, training provision and inclusion (eg. Devins et al 2017). Here, as in specific occupational sectors, there has been interest in job quality and the design of progression pathways (Green et al 2016, Dobbins and Plows 2017, Findlay et al 2017). The focus on job design and reward and the nature of progression opportunities offer examples of policy where support for young people is as much focused on employment demand and career pathways as it is on young people themselves. Of course, in running against the grain of UK government policy framings, institutional arrangements and incentives such initiatives operate within very constrained policy spaces (Hodgson and Spours 2019; Keep 2019).

These kinds of models echo sociological readings of processes shaping pathways to employment. At their heart are questions about the structure of available opportunity as well as scope for intervention in shaping it. However, as with the policies described in the preceding section, there has been relatively little engagement by youth sociologists with these approaches. Youth researchers have lambasted supply side models in general but rarely engage with the detail of policies as they frame middle pathways and prospects. Although the models which go beyond the supply side orthodoxy may have quite limited scope in the wider neoliberal landscape in which they play out, they offer interesting cases, working with a conceptualisation of the proximate contexts and structures of opportunity which shape young people's pathways from education to, and within, employment. They also raise interesting and important questions about employment pathways 'in the middle' and the scope for effective interventions to support such employment routes and prospects.

## **5. Discussion and conclusion**

There have been significant changes in the education-labour market nexus over recent decades, and school and college leavers confront a relative decline in openings into secure employment and in progression opportunities (Gardiner and Gregg 2017). Those on non-graduate pathways to work were described as overlooked in youth research in the early 2010s

(eg. Roberts 2011), echoing earlier accounts of youth transitions in the 1980s. Evidence remains relatively sparse regarding the current experiences of school and college leaver job seekers. More in-depth understanding of backgrounds, pathways and experiences here are key to interrogating policy and practice assumptions and consequences, and the shaping of unequal prospects amongst young people pursuing post-secondary and post-FE transitions to work.

The ‘overlooked and left behind majority’ have been at the centre of advocacy for improved vocational and technical education pathways (Sainsbury 2016), a renewed policy interest especially in light of concerns about skills shortages and of too singular a focus on higher education. Recent policies have sought to boost non-HE pathways and outcomes and to increase employer involvement in skills development, for example through the Apprenticeship Levy, new T level placements and improved employer engagement with schools. Despite greater emphasis on the role of employers, policy still reflects a remarkably myopic conception of labour demand and employment opportunity. The vortex of policies which centre on improving young people’s employability, access to employment relevant skills, information and networks are exemplified in the case of school mediated employer engagement. Extensive policy claims about the value added for young people are under-supported, drawing on mixed evidence and often decontextualized understanding of the forces shaping young people’s employment outcomes. There is interesting but limited evidence about how young people themselves attain value from these kinds of employer interventions and how this varies in relation to their family background and resources, school networks, local labour markets and employer recruitment channels. Within ‘business as usual’ local labour market settings, well designed employer engagement activities may boost young people’s employment chances yet they may fail to counter, and may play into, disequalising processes as more advantaged youngsters extract value from interventions in ways which less advantaged youngsters cannot. Research would usefully examine these socio-economic dynamics and more fully evidence what works and for whom as it varies across contexts. Valuable and important though this would be, it would remain framed in terms of the distribution of young people to jobs unless it were to also address the nature of work and progression opportunities. Alternative regional policy models focus on employment demand, job quality and progression, reflecting this wider conceptualisation of young people’s pathways and prospects. Such initiatives are rare and run against wider policy dynamics in England (cf. Hodgson and Spours 2019). How diverse interventions work in

practice, and vary across contexts, offers interesting scope for researching pathways and prospects for ‘ordinary kids’.

Research on middle pathways must consider questions of within-class diversity, not just of the ‘intersectional’ kind but in respect of socio-economic differences, practical resources and young people’s situated agency (cf. Hitlin and Long 2009). Family background is very important to life chances and shifting, classed, patterns of employment constraint and opportunity across recent decades further differentiate families in respect of the practical and material support that parents can offer – or need from- their young adult children (cf. Irwin 2017). The historical juncture at which young people seek to enter the labour market, too, has crucial bearing on present and lifetime chances, a case in point in the current Covid-19 pandemic crisis (Henehan 2020). Young people’s jobs are at particular risk given their prevalence in several of the service sectors which largely shut down in the spring of 2020 (Joyce and Xu 2020). Without further and radical interventions such as job, wage and training guarantees (eg Hutton 2020) very high unemployment rates loom, with recent education leavers and non-graduates at most risk (Henehan 2020).

Research on ‘the middle’, then, has an important role in shining light on the experiences of those who may appear, more or less, to be ‘getting by’, and broader relevancies for theorising youth transition more generally. For example, effectively designed comparisons could yield rich insights into the diversity and complexity of pathways of those with mid-level qualifications (cf Schoon and Lyons-Amos 2016) and evidence regarding polarising labour markets and disequalisation both across the middle, and in relation to graduate outcomes. For example, do interventions amplify or ameliorate background inequalities in supporting young people transition to the labour market? There is a relatively scant evidence base and it is hoped that this review has illustrated value in researching contemporary transitions from school and college to work and early employment pathways and experiences. The under-researched middle and contexts shaping young people’s employment pathways and prospects offer several important avenues of enquiry, ones which are ever more pressing in light of urgent social and political questions about skills, under-employment and young people’s life chances.

#### NOTE

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