

# **Opportunity structures and educational marginality: the post-16 transitions of young people outside education and employment**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports on findings from a three-year ethnographic study of twenty-four young people in northern England who were classified as not in education, employment or training (NEET), or at risk of becoming so. Drawing on conceptions of opportunity structure and educational marginality, the paper discusses the processes leading to young people becoming NEET after leaving school. It presents findings concerning the family backgrounds, school experiences and educational attainment of participants, and traces their initial post-16 destinations and their pathways to NEET status. Although most participants did not become NEET immediately after leaving school, restricted labour market opportunities and a lack of high-quality education and training for middle- and low-attaining young people exacerbated social and educational disadvantage. Over time, participants became increasingly restricted to marginal forms of learning. The paper argues that a focus on opportunity structures provides a powerful way of understanding these processes, and that alongside sustained NEET status, educational marginality should be of equal concern to policy makers.

## Introduction

I think everything is shit. What can I do now because I've not got much experience and I'm not good at maths and English so what can I do? [Kelsey, aged 18]

The classification “not in education, employment or training” (NEET) should be seen in the context of changing structures of opportunity (Roberts 2009). Fifty years ago, most working-class young people in the UK left school as early as possible, and were largely successful in obtaining employment. Since then, the disappearance of traditional industries and competition from older workers has reduced the number of jobs available for school leavers. For most suitably-qualified young people continuing in education appears more attractive than the labour market, and in a range of OECD countries staying in education beyond the age of 16 has become the norm (OECD 2016, p.292). Post-16 learning has also come to be seen as a defence against poverty and social exclusion. Although support for a direct association between NEET status and negative outcomes is limited, there is substantial evidence of long-term ‘scarring’ effects arising from youth unemployment and low educational attainment (Gregg & Tominey 2005; Bell and Blanchflower 2010; Crawford et al. 2011; Ralston et al. 2016). Non-participation after leaving school is therefore seen by policy makers as a factor in sustained unemployment and welfare dependency, and those who leave education early have become increasingly marginalised, either as a member of the NEET category or in one of the almost equally problematic ‘jobs without training’ (Roberts 2009; Lawy, Quinn & Diment 2009). Consequently, much effort has been expended to retain young people in education or training to the age of eighteen and beyond.

In England, these efforts have included targets for reducing the number of 16 to 18-year-olds classified as NEET, supported by advice and guidance activity and financial assistance for certain groups of disadvantaged young people. From 2013 onwards, legislation to raise the

compulsory participation age (RPA), first to 17 and then to the 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, came into effect. Although this measure sounds far-reaching, NEET rates for this age group have always been quite low relative to 18 to 24-year-olds, typically around 6% for 16 year olds and 8% for 17 year olds over the period 1997-2012. Since then, they have fallen further, to around 3% and 5% respectively in 2015 (DfE 2016). RPA has therefore reinforced the positioning of the relatively small population of NEET young people aged 16-17 as a problematic and stigmatised group (Maguire 2013; 2015a; 2015b). However, education and training opportunities for NEET young people remain variable in quality, and the forms of learning they provide have often been criticised (Atkins 2013; Simmons, Thompson & Russell 2014; Beck 2015). Using terms such as 'marginal learning' to refer to repeated encounters with employability programmes and other courses focusing on re-engagement, these authors argue that much NEET provision adds to the marginalisation of an already disadvantaged group. Even high-quality interventions have a limited impact (Mawn et al. 2017), reminding us of the crucial role of labour markets and training opportunities in the longer-term prospects of NEET young people.

Although the NEET classification should not be used uncritically (Thompson 2011), it draws attention to important dimensions of socioeconomic disadvantage, and the factors involved in young people becoming NEET are of considerable interest. The general outlines of socioeconomic 'risk factors' for NEET status are increasingly well understood, particularly through quantitative studies of longitudinal data (Bynner & Parsons 2002; Duckworth & Schoon 2012; Schoon 2014). However, there is a lack of qualitative research on how risk factors actually translate into the complexities of real lives. This paper aims to address this gap by using ethnographic data to explore the processes through which young people became NEET during a period of economic recession. It focuses particularly on the post-16 transitions of these young people, examining their schooling before the age of sixteen, and their subsequent experiences in education or training up to the point at which they first became NEET. The paper argues that recognizing the opportunity structures within which

young people are situated, including the prevalence of marginal forms of learning, is crucial to understanding how risk factors operate. The paper begins by explaining how the concept of opportunity structure will be understood and applied. The nature of the ethnographic data to be used is then discussed, together with the approach to data analysis. Major themes emerging from the data are presented, including the family and neighbourhood backgrounds of participants, their initial post-16 destinations, and the processes through which they became NEET. The discussion of these themes explores the nature of educational marginality and the role of opportunity structures in mediating socioeconomic risks.

### **Opportunity structures, educational marginality and post-16 transitions**

The concept of youth transition has become a contested idea, often replaced by a range of terms describing pathways which are differentiated, individualized and non-linear (Furlong 2009; Wyn 2014). However, whilst social inequality may be experienced in more individualized ways than hitherto, structures such as class and gender continue to dominate life chances. The resulting interplay of structure and agency provides a significant conceptual challenge for researchers, and in attempting to understand the actions and narratives of young people it can be difficult to avoid excessive individualism on the one hand, and determinism on the other. The concept of opportunity structure (Roberts 1977, 2009) provides a way of approaching this dilemma which is particularly appropriate to the present case, enabling a contextualized analysis of post-16 transitions for a specific group of school leavers. Roberts (2009, p.358) writes of the advantages of 'decentring' young people, by focusing on the opportunity structures that surround them rather than 'probing their minds'. This is not to say that identity and agency are unimportant, but that they are not independent of objective circumstances. As Roberts (1997, p.348) puts it, young people's situations have been restructured, not destructured, by social and economic change, and although opportunities may be replaced or recombined, familiar patterns of advantage continue to reproduce themselves.

Opportunity structures are formed by the interaction of family backgrounds, education, and labour markets, providing a frame within which young people exercise agency, but an agency constrained by the logics of these structuring factors. Other elements are also pertinent, including gender and ethnicity, housing markets and welfare systems. Roberts (2009) proposes that behaviour within opportunity structures, including class differences in aspiration and orientations to post-16 learning, can be understood from a rational action perspective in which the subjective evaluation of costs and benefits influences young people's decisions. Opportunity structures are to be understood dynamically and relationally: the import of a family's class position, for example, is not restricted to the characteristics of that position, but to the changing class structure and the implications of an expanded and competitive middle class. In turn, as educational expansion – including increased working-class participation – produces 'social congestion' (Brown 2013), competition filters through the occupational structure and restricts opportunities for the most vulnerable. At the same time, low-skilled work has become increasingly unattractive as in-work poverty and 'flexible' labour markets erode the benefits of employment. From this perspective, the 'poverty of aspiration' often attributed to NEET young people can be seen in relation to a poverty of opportunity.

Although the exogenous dimensions of opportunity structures – for example, labour markets, employer practices, and educational systems – profoundly influence young people's prospects, it is the relationships between these dimensions and individual backgrounds that frame the nature of specific post-16 transitions. Becoming NEET in particular is associated with a range of indicators of social and economic disadvantage, which may be regarded as part of the endogenous dimension of an opportunity structure. Low educational attainment is perhaps the strongest predictor of NEET status (Bynner & Parsons 2002; Duckworth & Schoon 2012). However, low attainment can itself be related to a range of other factors, notably aspects of socioeconomic disadvantage. Although social class operates largely

through low attainment, other circumstances are independently associated with being NEET at age 18, including low levels of parental education, living in social housing, and being in a lone-parent family (Bynner & Parsons 2002; Duckworth & Schoon 2012; Schoon 2014). Parental worklessness appears to have little independent effect, but mediates factors such as parental education (Schoon 2014). Gender is associated with increased risk – effected largely through young motherhood or other caring responsibilities – and also modifies the way that other risks operate (Bynner & Parsons 2002; Schoon 2014). Being in care has a substantial negative effect on educational outcomes, although its impact is reduced when socioeconomic background is taken into account (O’Higgins et al. 2015). When several risk factors coexist, the chances that a young person will become NEET are increased. Conversely, certain factors protect against becoming NEET, most particularly prior achievement, educational aspirations and school engagement. For those with multiple socioeconomic risks, not truanting and having strong educational motivation at school is a significant protection (Duckworth & Schoon 2012). In addition, the negative impact of NEET status is reduced for those with higher levels of education and skills (Ralston et al. 2016).

The idea of youth is culturally and politically elastic, and some researchers have seen concepts such as NEET and their extension to older age groups as part of an attempt to legitimate increasingly protracted and uncertain transitions by emphasizing supposed deficits in young people (Simmons & Smyth 2016). However, whilst it may be true that some school leavers are ill-equipped to compete in the labour market, opportunity structures influence both the availability of work and the potential benefits of participation in education or training: engagement in post-16 learning does not necessarily preclude negative consequences in later life. Since the early 1980s, successive UK governments have struggled to make effective provision for those young people most affected by the decline of traditional youth labour markets, and programmes such as Youth Opportunities, Youth Training, and – more recently – Foundation Learning and Activity Agreements have come and gone with little credit (Coffield, Borrill & Marshall 1986; Gleeson 1989; Hutchinson, Beck & Hooley 2016).

Young people completing such provision are likely to find themselves NEET once more, or transferring to similar programmes. Indeed, ‘churning’ between non-participation and different forms of education, training or employment is common (Simmons, Thompson & Russell 2014; Ralston et al. 2016). When such experiences are compounded with educational careers characterised by disruption, school exclusion and failure, the inadequacy of conceptual models based on a simple dichotomy of participation and disengagement becomes evident (Thompson 2011). These considerations suggest the utility of a broader category, educational marginality, in understanding the experiences of young people who have been NEET. Educational marginality may be characterised by a combination of social and educational disadvantage, low educational attainment and a failure to progress within post-16 provision. Typically, this will involve repeated enrolments in courses at or below Level 1, possibly interspersed by short periods NEET, but may also include longer periods NEET or sustained participation in a course offering minimal prospects. Of course, marginality may be understood more generally, as a state or process experienced by groups of people as a consequence of large-scale social and political change (Simmons, Thompson & Russell 2014). The educational marginality introduced here is rooted in this perspective, and its construction in young people’s lives should be viewed in the context of political movements such as neo-liberalism as well as long-standing class divisions in society.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The findings discussed in this paper derive from a longitudinal ethnographic study of NEET young people conducted between October 2010 and March 2013. Twenty-four young people took part, aged between fifteen and twenty when the research began (Tables A1-A4). The fieldwork took place in two neighbouring local authorities, which like many other northern towns illustrate the changing nature of youth transitions in post-industrial Britain. Although in both places manufacturing accounts for a higher proportion of employment than the UK

average, service work predominates. Around one-third of employment is part-time and much work is insecure and low-paid. Education and training for school leavers is provided by school sixth forms and sixth-form colleges, two further education colleges, and various private and voluntary organizations which offer training for vulnerable groups. A careers service operating as a social enterprise provides advice and guidance to young people in both authorities. Practitioners interviewed in the research described increasing difficulty in finding suitable opportunities for vulnerable school leavers. They reported that less than half of local businesses employed any young people, and competition for apprenticeships had increased since the onset of recession in 2008, effectively excluding those least attractive to employers. The location of the research is ethnically diverse, with around 60% of school-age pupils being White British, and 20% from Pakistani heritage families.

Engaging marginalized young people in qualitative research is a challenging process (Conolly 2008; Russell 2013), and two months of exploratory contacts with youth services and training providers were necessary before any young people were contacted. The participants could be described as an opportunity sample, in that availability and willingness to co-operate were important factors. Once contact had been established, a 'snowball' approach proved useful, in which existing participants and service providers suggested others who might be willing to take part. In the end, the sample successfully reflected the intended selection strategy: to access participants in a range of circumstances, including young people belonging to important NEET 'subgroups' such as care leavers, young people with learning disabilities, young parents and young offenders. The relatively high proportion of participants who had been in care or who had children can be explained partly by the over-representation of these categories in the NEET population as a whole, but also by the effects of accessing most participants through service providers, which inevitably focus on young people facing specific challenges.

The research data includes extensive field notes on participant observation in varied settings including education, work and home. Seventy-eight interviews were conducted and transcribed, including 54 with young people and twenty with practitioners such as Connexions advisers and tutors in training providers; the remaining interviews comprised three with employers and one with a parent. The full corpus of data follows participants over an extended period, both before and after they became NEET, and provides insights into many more issues than can be discussed in a single paper. For an extensive report of the research, see Simmons, Thompson & Russell (2014). In this paper the focus is on data relevant to the processes leading to participants' first entry to the NEET category. Of particular relevance are the 'life maps' on which each young person was asked to record significant events, including the period before becoming involved with the research. These enabled quite dense chronological and personal information to be elicited, such as qualifications obtained and details of schooling, without reliance on highly structured interview schedules.

The first stage of data analysis involved cross-checking each young person's accounts at different times, matching with documentary evidence where available, triangulating with the perspectives of practitioners, and referring to field notes. This process gave some confidence in young people's narratives, although inevitably certain omissions, contradictions and confusions came to light. In general, participants did not appear to give deliberately inaccurate information, although it was common to find that they could not remember the names of training providers or the grades obtained in some qualifications. Some participants – often the better qualified – gave detailed and credible accounts of schools attended, subjects taken and grades achieved. Others dismissed their schooling in a few sentences, and understandably appeared reluctant to focus on details. Nevertheless, a reasonably full chronology was built up over time, and discussions about the life maps illuminated the emotions and meanings that memories of education evoked. A thematic analysis of the data was then conducted, guided by the components of opportunity

structures and organized according to three stages: schooling, initial post-16 destinations, and pathways to becoming NEET. The presentation of findings broadly follows this analysis, beginning with social background and educational attainment and then discussing how opportunity structures framed post-16 participation and entry to NEET status.

### **Social background and schooling**

Social class backgrounds were analysed through data on parental occupations, family income, housing status and location, and parental experiences of education. Although many young people in the NEET category come from middle-class families, most qualitative research on this subject has involved participants from mainly working-class backgrounds, particularly from families with low incomes (for example, Rees et al. 1996; Finlay et al. 2010; Russell et al. 2011). Whilst this is partly because of the higher risk of becoming NEET associated with such young people, it may also be a consequence of how researchers engage with prospective research participants as described earlier. In the present study, almost all participants had parents, step-parents or siblings who were either in working-class occupations or unemployed. Where known, the employment of fathers and stepfathers included a range of unskilled manual work. More skilled work was also represented, including mechanic, chef, and lorry driver. The employment of mothers was largely in the service sector, with unskilled jobs including factory work and social care; more skilled employment included teaching assistant and clerical work. Ten mothers were unemployed, suffering from long-term illness, or at home looking after children. Family income tended to be low and reliance on in-work and out-of-work benefits was common. Saheera and Shabina were of Pakistani heritage, whilst Alfie was of mixed heritage. All other participants were from White British backgrounds.

Although participants were aware that family background constrained their lives in a number of respects – including income, housing, and access to cultural and social resources – they rarely articulated their circumstances as anything unusual. However, their relationship with

family members was affected by poverty and disadvantage in various ways. Loans from parents, even small ones, were debts to be repaid; overcrowding meant that some participants had to leave the family home; and contributions to family income took precedence over long-term educational plans. The schools attended by participants often contained above-average proportions of disadvantaged pupils, and their homes whilst growing up also tended to be in deprived areas. Parental education was difficult to ascertain but few parents seemed to have formal qualifications and some had themselves experienced disrupted schooling:

It was alright until secondary school and then I suppose it fell apart a bit ... I used to get picked on and bullied and that kind of puts you off from going. But, saying that, there were things that I had to get done at home because my mum weren't very good and everything and so I had to take some time off ... so I wouldn't get it in the ear from my mum. [Tracy, Jasmine's mother]

It would therefore be reasonable to summarise the social background of participants in terms of significantly restricted access to economic capital and to dominant forms of cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1986). Within these broad outlines there was some variation, and particularly in relation to social capital some participants were able to draw on their involvement with charitable organisations to extend their social networks and engage in activities that would otherwise have been prohibitively expensive. However, as in other research in poor neighbourhoods (for example, Green & White 2008), bonding rather than bridging social capital predominated, tying most participants to local areas and limiting opportunity structures. Most participants were entirely dependent on public transport, and the cost or length of journeys caused difficulties in socialising, attending interviews and travel to college or work placements.

### **School attainment**

Although overall GCSE attainment is perhaps best understood as a continuum (Playford & Gayle 2016), by combining educational attainment at school with other factors four broad

groups of participants could be identified. One group, comprising six young people, had attended special schools for children with learning and/or behavioural difficulties (Table A1). Of these, only Alfie had not been in care. Apart from Karla, who had obtained Entry Level 3 awards in English and mathematics, none had achieved any formal qualifications. All six had low levels of literacy and numeracy. In three cases, attendance at these schools stemmed from behavioural problems with a range of underpinning factors. Kelsey had been excluded from primary school for 'Kicking off; fighting; throwing things; being a normal sort of kid'. This behaviour continued into secondary school and in Year 8 Kelsey was placed in a special school, excluded a few months later, and from there 'I went to another special school and it was the only school that would take me in the whole of England'. Sid and Vernon had also displayed violent behaviour, and Sid had been in trouble with the police for burglary and assault. In Vernon's case changes of school, persistent truancy, being bullied and disruptive behaviour had ended his schooling in Year 10. For these three participants, such behaviour was set within a context of frequent changes of caring arrangements, involving foster families, children's homes, living with older siblings, and estrangement from one or both parents.

Seven participants, three of whom had been in care, had attended only mainstream schools but had GCSE attainment below grade C (Table A2). Three had no formal qualifications, whilst the others had GCSE grades D-G in various subjects. These young people had experienced considerable disruption in their school careers: in addition to changes of school due to parental circumstances or being taken into care, three had been permanently excluded from school, and two had then attended pupil referral units. Family support for education was often limited, and persistent truancy was common. In later years missed examinations undermined earlier progress:

My mum didn't bother to send me to school and she just stayed in bed and I had my brother to look after. [In Year 10-11] I didn't like school and then I were arguing with my mum and stepdad all the time ... I went for three [final exams]

and I got kicked out of one of them and I just sat there in another one because I just didn't have a clue and then in the other one I fell asleep. [Becky]

The two boys in this group had both been in trouble with the police. Danny was under the supervision of the local Youth Offending Team after stealing from his cousin, whilst Johnny had a history of serious offences including common assault, racism, vandalism and arson.

Six participants left school with at least one GCSE at grade C or above, although only one had achieved grade C in mathematics and none in English<sup>1</sup> (Table A3). These higher grades were almost all in creative or vocationally-oriented subjects, such as art, drama, product design, and child development. More prestigious subjects – notably science – were typically at grades E-G. In some ways, the schooling of these participants had been less traumatic than the previous group, and none had been permanently excluded. However, two had been in care, and two friends, Saheera and Shabina, had been placed on an alternative curriculum within their school because of their behaviour. Jackson had 'nearly' been excluded for assaulting a teacher, and had also come into contact with the Youth Offending Team for this and an assault on another teacher. Jodi had been placed in a pupil referral unit when she became pregnant in Year 10 (no other participant became pregnant whilst still at school).

The final group comprised five young people with what in England is known as full level 2 attainment, that is with at least five GCSEs at grades A\*-C (Table A4). Hailey and Sean had achieved these grades in ten subjects, including both English and mathematics, although only Hailey had achieved any A or A\* grades. The achievements of the three other participants were more modest, and none had achieved A\*-C grades in both English and mathematics. Nevertheless, they appeared to have a relatively secure foundation for some

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<sup>1</sup> The significance of this point in terms of opportunity structures is that many post-16 courses at level 2 or above require a pass at grade C in English and/or mathematics.

form of upper secondary education or training. All five cases might therefore be regarded as exemplifying moderately successful school careers. However, it should not be supposed that these young people had untroubled lives or had experienced significantly higher levels of family support than many other participants. All had experienced disruptions to their schooling because of changes in family circumstances, Isla had been in care and Sean had lived in overcrowded conditions as part of a large family:

I had to look after the kids a lot of nights and I just wasn't able to go out or do anything. So I had to look after the kids constantly while they were going out all night and getting drunk and stuff and coming back at some time in the morning...

Some researchers distinguish between young people who are NEET and a 'missing' or 'overlooked' middle – that is, middle-attaining young people who are neither NEET nor following 'tidy' pathways through post-compulsory education such as A-level courses (Roberts 2011; Hodgson & Spours 2014). However, in terms of attainment there was considerable overlap between young people who eventually joined the NEET category and this missing middle. Early social and educational disadvantage cut across all attainment groups, and the experience of many participants was already one of marginalisation. Although a number of participants could be regarded as middle attainers, their experience of family, neighbourhood and schooling was not sharply distinguished from lower-attaining peers.

### **Post-school destinations**

Very few of the twenty-four participants became NEET immediately after leaving school – or reaching the school-leaving age in the case of those who had effectively left already.

Saheera was married three months after her sixteenth birthday and continued to attend school part-time until the end of term – an arrangement instituted before her marriage because of disruptive behaviour. Initially, her intention was to begin a hairdressing course or to find a job. However, she missed an interview for the course, and various attempts to find work failed. Although stating she was bored at home, Saheera did not appear to consider returning to education. Two other participants became NEET immediately. Becky and Jed had several months out after leaving school. One participant, Sara, found employment – this was cash-in-hand work for her father, a building labourer and delivery driver. The work ‘dried up’ after six months, and Sara became depressed, remaining NEET for about a year before beginning a short-lived factory job alongside her mother.

The remaining participants all entered education or training on leaving school. In general, those least qualified began attending courses in training providers and colleges which offered support in basic education (literacy, numeracy and general life skills) or were oriented towards employability (see Tables A1 and A2). Participants with higher attainment, but below full level 2, entered Level 1 and Level 2 courses at further education colleges in vocational areas such as Health and Social Care and Public Services (Table A2). Finally, apart from Hailey – who began an A-level course – the highest attaining group entered a variety of vocational programmes, mainly at Level 3. Only one participant – Sean – began an apprenticeship from school, a Level 2 programme in catering (Table A3).

These initial post-school destinations may be understood partly in terms of choices made according to young people’s aspirations. Particularly for the higher attainers, courses such as performing arts (Jasmine), A-level accountancy (Hailey), and catering (Sean) reflected sustained interests. Even for lower-attaining participants, it was often possible to find courses which related in some way to personal interests or educational needs. The choice of vocational subjects reflected a preference for more practical forms of learning, and this

underlay Sean's decision to begin an apprenticeship rather than a college-based course. It also reflected classed and gendered aspirations for later employment, which usually were oriented towards working-class occupations such as hairdressing, care work, and motor vehicle maintenance. However, these choices can also be seen in the context of limited opportunities. For those unable to progress to Level 3 programmes, there is little choice other than vocational learning – however relevant to one's own interests or the local labour market – and the least qualified young people face a particularly unappealing range of possibilities. During the research, the Wolf Review (2011) drew attention to the lack of progression and the minimal labour market returns associated with much low-level vocational provision, and it is questionable whether there has been real progress since (see, for example, Raffe 2015; Atkins 2016). Aspirations, whether high or low, may therefore be seen as playing a relatively small part within the opportunity structures surrounding these young people.

### **Becoming NEET**

Entering the NEET category is not necessarily a clearly defined event, and is perhaps best conceptualised as a process in which the connection between an individual and participation in education, training or employment varies in strength over time. Particular circumstances, such as missing out on a college place, ill health or pregnancy, are then liable to sever this connection, at least temporarily. The complexity of defining NEET status also blurs the distinction between participating and not participating, and in this section becoming NEET will be understood as being outside education, employment or training for a period of at least one month, but excluding breaks between terms such as the summer holidays<sup>2</sup>. This definition corresponds to the one used by the UK government in calculating NEET statistics (ONS 2013); from some perspectives the period of one month may be considered too short to capture the experiences of those most vulnerable, and six months is often taken as a

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<sup>2</sup> Paid employment of any kind, including cash-in-hand work, is counted as participation.

more powerful indicator of exclusion (Bynner & Parsons 2002; Furlong 2006). However, in the present study even relatively short periods of non-participation often marked a qualitative change in the nature of engagement, for example between higher-status forms such as apprenticeships or college courses at Level 2 and Level 3, and low-status programmes aimed primarily at re-engagement. It is important to capture this kind of dynamic, which can be the precursor to more extended periods of NEET status.

Of the twenty-one participants who entered education, employment or training as school leavers, only Shabina remained in education throughout the fieldwork, progressing from Level 1 to Level 3 in Health and Social Care. Hers was one of the few cases in which a ladder of progression appeared to work effectively, and it was more common to find that participants moved between different Level 1 courses or shorter-duration employability programmes, sometimes repeating the same course. Nearly half the participants experienced these 'churning' careers as a pathway to becoming NEET. Formal employment played little part in such movements. Many participants were provided with unpaid work placements, a few volunteered in charity shops, and as noted earlier there was some cash-in-hand work. Although few jobs were regarded as unacceptable, paid employment proved very difficult to obtain in the first year or so after leaving school, and training provision dominated the experiences of these participants. Danny vividly describes his perceptions of a succession of courses, first at two training providers and then – after being 'kicked out' for taking drugs and drinking – a re-engagement course at a further education college:

[At the first training provider it was] basically IT and I got some qualifications but I didn't learn anything ... I got my Level 1 and my Level 1 in maths and English too.

[The second training provider was] plastering, rendering, basic construction stuff. That only lasted a month tops before I were kicked out. [I didn't want to do it], it was just something to keep me out of trouble. My choice would be to go to college and do a Level 2 in something but I don't think I've got the grades.

[At college] It's alright. It's not what I originally thought it would be. I thought we'd come in and we'd have a structured lesson and ... we'd do functional skills but, in

reality, it's just come in and look at possible job applications; do a couple of job interviews and then they'd send them off. It's just a doss about ...

Churning careers were often associated with specific aspects of poverty and social disadvantage, such as changes in care arrangements, homelessness, and lack of money for job applications. Behavioural problems such as fighting, disruption and low attendance, bullying, and poor relationships with teachers, family members, or peers were also implicated in non-completion of courses. However, churning could arise from courses successfully completed, due to lack of progression opportunities or because courses did not equip participants with coherent knowledge and skills. Simmons (2009) draws attention to the overemphasis on contextually tied, procedural knowledge in employability and similar provision which, whilst it acknowledges the sporadic educational biographies of some participants, may do little to prepare them for more conceptual forms of learning. Acquah & Huddleston (2014) outline seven principles underpinning effective vocational provision, including the rigour and progression opportunities noted by Simmons but also encompassing other features potentially difficult to reconcile with these: attractiveness, vocational authenticity, flexibility, and a sustainable focus on re-engagement. Participants rarely encountered provision coming anywhere near to meeting these requirements. Katie, who began an E2E<sup>3</sup> programme after leaving school, describes repetition and frustration similar to Danny's, but also hints at what might prove more effective:

Most of the time I were just sat at the table bored. It got me onto another course but it were just boring. That [Foundation Learning] got me onto a child care course – but I got bored in that one as well because it was trying to teach me things I already knew ... [Then] I did another E2E course which was better. It was more structured and there was always things you were supposed to do. Like we used to work on us maths and English and because I was wanting to do elderly care they'd got some work for that as well ...

Perceptions of the immediate value of a course could be distinguished from a more critical view of its longer-term worth. For example, whilst attending an employability course Kelsey

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<sup>3</sup> Entry to Employment, an employability programme offered between 2003 and 2011.

reported that her mother was pleased 'that I'm actually getting out and doing things'. However, she had few illusions about the value of the courses she had attended: 'I think everything is shit. What can I do now because I've not got much experience and I'm not good at maths and English so what can I do?' Danny found his Level 1 courses 'pointless' and saw no reason to inform prospective employers of these achievements, or to expect them to understand such qualifications. However, a course could still have short-term economic value, boosting a young person's income: "I could get a job for nine hundred a month or I could [do] pre-Foundation Learning and get a hundred pound a week or I could stay on the dole and get a hundred pound a fortnight" [Karla].

Although pregnancy is a significant risk factor in becoming NEET, only three participants left education for this reason. After several months of an E2E programme, Katie became pregnant and later left the course when morning sickness reduced her attendance to levels unacceptable to her tutors. Hailey gave up an A-level course in her first term when she became pregnant, but remained in education until quite near the birth – attending various re-engagement programmes partly for something to do but also so that her mother could continue to claim child benefits. Hailey gave different accounts of her reasons for leaving, first saying that it was because she was finding concentration difficult and was falling behind, but over a year later stating that she would have had to leave before her AS-level examinations for 'health and safety reasons'. A further precipitating factor in becoming NEET was the presence of physical or mental health problems, which appeared to be a significant part of the process in a few cases. Isla's hairdressing apprenticeship broke down after a relatively short period of minor illness. Vernon explained why he had been 'kicked out of college for fighting':

I would sit there but when people are talking and not listening to the teacher and distracting others – that's what does my head in. So that's the reason why I don't feel comfortable doing it ... we had to write, like, twelve essays a year and that was

too much for what I wanted to do. So I had problems with my mental health ... I have anger problems.

A common factor in many of the pathways outlined above is the interaction between systems of performativity and accountability in post-16 education (Russell et al. 2010; Gleeson et al. 2015) with the challenges facing young people attempting to navigate these systems. There was a particular emphasis placed on the need for a grade C in English, and to a lesser extent mathematics, even for entry to relatively low-level courses. In several cases, this led to last-minute disappointments and changes of plan. Attendance monitoring, fixed start dates in more traditional provision, and the need for guidance workers to meet targets tended to reduce flexibility and constrained the agency of young people, who often talked of lacking control and used expressions such as being 'put on' or 'sent to' courses and providers. However, there was also a surprising resilience in accepting official discourse on the benefits of continued education:

Well all of it's good really because I received more certificates in drug awareness and alcohol awareness; anti-social behaviour, first aid ... and we do something else as well but I can't remember what it was now but it's more things on my CV and it looks better, don't it? [Isla]

Although some parents engaged with practitioners, this engagement tended to be limited and in most cases young people negotiated alone with tutors and guidance workers, or simply dropped out of provision when attendance or coursework problems appeared insurmountable.

## **Discussion**

The findings presented in this paper illustrate the critical role of opportunity structures in the process of becoming educationally marginal. Although it could be argued that for many participants marginalisation was a consequence of disaffection and disengagement from

school, there was little evidence that behaviours such as truancy, disruption and criminality arose from unreasonably low aspirations or a rejection of mainstream values. Instead, they appeared rooted in social disadvantage and the broader marginalisation of families and communities. The longer-term aspirations of participants were thoroughly conventional, centring on future employment and constructing a family life, although their expectations were not high (see also Finlay et al. 2010). Few participants at any level of attainment became NEET immediately after leaving school, and a significant proportion took part in employment, education or training for lengthy periods before their participation ended for the first time. Post-16 destinations were, in general, adapted to their educational attainment and the opportunities available. Even the lowest attainers, including those in the most difficult circumstances, often retained some form of link with education, at least initially, illustrating the importance of marginality in the complex relationship between attainment and participation. Conformity to government policy on post-16 participation, not resistance, characterised the behaviour of most participants. However, all but one eventually became NEET for sustained periods and for young people across all attainment groups establishing a stable transition from school proved a difficult task. Demand from employers was virtually non-existent, and the few apprenticeships taken up appeared to be of poor quality and were not completed.

In the absence of employment opportunities, and with few family resources to draw on, participants were almost entirely reliant on the post-16 education and training system. As we have seen, they were not well-served by this system, and education and training opportunities were largely ineffective in securing progression. Although 'churning' through such provision could be regarded as a success for tutors and guidance workers, in that young people are retained in education, there is little clear evidence that it offers sustained benefits and some evidence that it can have a negative impact on future prospects. Either way, for the participants in this research, provision aimed at NEET prevention did not prevent them becoming NEET. More generally, the ability of current policy initiatives to meet

the needs of low- and middle-attaining young people is highly questionable (Raffe 2015; Maguire 2015b; Hutchinson et al. 2016).

The importance of social background and educational attainment as factors in opportunity structures is also supported by this research. At the age of 16, all participants had more than one socioeconomic risk factor for becoming NEET. The most common of these were low social class, low attainment, and parental worklessness. The research data showed the direct effects of poverty on post-16 participation in a number of ways. In addition, the majority of participants had experienced disruption of some kind to their schooling, half had a history of truancy and/or school exclusion, and over one-third had been in care. Multiple risk factors were present in almost all cases, and apart from those in the higher attaining group the protective factors identified by Duckworth & Schoon (2012) were absent. Even for the higher attainers, a lack of English and mathematics qualifications could be problematic. These factors limited young people's opportunity structures, reducing both their options and their chances of successful completion of the provision available to them.

Policy makers are right to be concerned about disadvantaged young people who are long-term members of the NEET category. However, as this paper has shown, young people in marginal positions, neither NEET for long periods nor progressing in post-16 education or training, should also be of concern. In some respects, educational marginality is a more specific concept than the diverse NEET category, and focuses on young people with social and educational disadvantage. Whether as a precursor to sustained non-participation, or as an extended state in itself, educational marginality appeared regressive rather than a stepping-stone to future inclusion. Although a belief in the potential value of education proved remarkably durable, it co-existed with growing frustration and disillusionment over the programmes young people had experienced. This is not to say that all such programmes are valueless. Educational marginality must be understood contextually and longitudinally: it is not the characteristics of a particular form of provision at a single point in time that creates

marginality, but the interaction of a socially-situated individual with the opportunity structures surrounding them. As Acquah & Huddleston (2014) point out, a focus on re-engagement is essential at certain times for young people outside education and training, so that provision displaying the inadequacies identified by Simmons (2009) may be useful at specific junctures. But if no opportunities are available which interrupt the kind of processes identified in this paper, education and training will operate as little more than a 'warehouse' for disadvantaged young people.

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### Appendix: Summary of participants' educational careers

Note that the term *Basic Skills* represents a range of provision including literacy, numeracy, and general life skills, sometimes with a specific focus such as childcare or animal care. Female participants are represented by bold type.

	Age at start of research	GCSE Maths & English	Disrupted primary	Disrupted secondary	Truancy	Exclusion	In care	Pregnancy/parenthood	PRU	Crime	Initial post-16 destination
Alfie	19										Training provider, E2E
Cayden	19			•			•				Special school to 18
<b>Karla</b>	18	E3 English E3 Maths		•	•		•				College, Hairdressing
<b>Kelsey</b>	18		•	•		•	•		•		College, Basic Skills
Sid	16		•	•		•	•			•	Training provider, Construction
Vernon	20		•	•	•		•	Father (at 20)	•		College, Basic Skills

Table A1: Young people who had attended schools for children with learning and/or behavioural difficulties.

	Age at start of research	GCSE Maths & English	Disrupted primary	Disrupted secondary	Truancy	Exclusion	In care	Pregnancy/parenthood	PRU	Crime	Initial post-16 destination
<b>Becky</b>	17		•	•			•				NEET
Danny	17	English D Maths G		•		•				•	Training provider, IT Level 1
<b>Jaylene</b>	18		•	•	•	•	•		•		College, Basic Skills
<b>Jess</b>	19	English D	•					Became pregnant at 17			Training provider, Care Level 2
Johnny	16	English E Maths E		•	•	•	•		•	•	Training provider
<b>Katie</b>	19			•	•			Became pregnant at 18			College, E2E
<b>Sara</b>	18	English E Maths E	•	•	•			Became pregnant at 18			Employment, labourer

Table A2: Young people with low attainment who had attended mainstream schools only

	Age at start of research	GCSE Maths & English	Disrupted primary	Disrupted secondary	Truancy	Exclusion	In care	Pregnancy/parenthood	PRU	Crime	Initial post-16 destination
<b>Chantelle</b>	18		•	•			•	Became pregnant at 17		•	College, Health & Social Care L2
Jackson	17	Maths D English F									College, Public Services
Jed	16		•	•			•			•	NEET
<b>Jodi</b>	19	English D Maths C						Pregnant at 15 and 17	•		College, Health & Social Care
<b>Saheera</b>	15	English E				•					NEET
<b>Shabina</b>	15	English G Maths E				•					College, Health & Social Care L1

Table A3: Young people with moderate attainment (at least one GCSE grade A\*-C but below full level 2)

	Age at start of research	GCSE Maths & English	Disrupted primary	Disrupted secondary	Truancy	Exclusion	In care	Pregnancy/parenthood	PRU	Crime	Initial post-16 destination
<b>Hailey</b>	16	Maths C English C	•					During A levels, age 16			College, A levels
<b>Isla</b>	18	English D Maths D		•			•	At college, age 16; again age 18			College, Art & Design
<b>Jasmine</b>	18	English D Maths B									College, Performing Arts L3
Sean	16	Maths B English C		•							Apprenticeship, Catering L2
<b>Steph</b>	17	English E Maths D		•	•	•					College, Public Services

Table A4: Young people with full level 2 attainment (At least 5 GCSE grade A\*-C)