RESEARCH

Choice at the end of compulsory schooling: A research review

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The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department for Education and Skills.

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SUMMARY

Context

This report reviews the recent UK literature on when, how and why young people make their choices about post-16 pathways. These choices are influenced by a range of factors whose importance varies between individuals. The way in which decisions are made and the range of options between which young people have a meaningful choice also vary.

The relative scarcity of longitudinal studies, either quantitative or qualitative, that follow young people through the secondary school years means that the evidence base for understanding the decision-making process at age 16 is not strong.

Theoretical models of choice

Structuralist models of choice suggest that the paths that young people take at 16 are largely shaped by constraints - institutional, economic or cultural - over which they have no control. Economic models of choice assume that their decisions are based on a rational assessment of the potential returns to each option. The model of 'pragmatic rationality' takes a middle position between these two poles. According to this model, while some rational calculation is involved in choices at age 16, these choices tend to be constrained by a realistic perception of opportunities, and the young person's own attitudes, predispositions and personal history also play an important role.

Mode and timing of decisions

Studies indicate a good deal of variation in the way that young people go about choosing their post-16 route. They differ in the range of options they are prepared to consider, in the care with which they weigh up these options, and in the consistency with which they stick to their choice.

The timing of decisions also varies. Though decisions do not have to be finalised until the end of Year 11, many young people have effectively ruled out certain options well before that date. Others avoid taking any decision at all for as long as they can. However the proportion of young people who decide very early in their secondary school career to leave education at age 16 is probably smaller now than in previous decades. Those young people who say in Year 11 that they have decided to leave, tend not to change their minds.

Young people's ideas about the type of work they would like to do start to take shape in their early teens. However in Year 11 these ideas are still very fluid, and many young people have only a vague notion of what their preferred occupation involves.

Instrumental reasons for choices

The research literature shows that young people generally see education in instrumental terms. For them, its main purpose is to help them to get qualifications in order to improve their employment prospects or enter higher education. Thus, although decisions about post-16 pathways may involve several factors, the main reasons that young people give, when asked, for staying in full-time education after 16 refer to these goals. Those who are unsure in Year 11 whether to stay or leave often make their mind up on the basis of practicalities, particularly their actual examination results and whether they can find a job.

Young people who leave education at 16 are usually just as concerned about employment as those who stay on, but tend to attach greater weight to immediate earnings than to a future career. They may also be deterred from staying on by a lack of faith in the value of qualifications in the labour market, believing that personal contacts and luck are what really count.

Attitudes to education

Not surprisingly, young people who dislike school tend to leave as soon as possible. Several large cross-sectional surveys indicate that most secondary school pupils are reasonably happy. However a significant minority of pupils have very negative attitudes towards school which tend to strengthen as they get older. Their dislike often focuses on the school curriculum and on relationships with teachers, and finds expression in disruptive behaviour, bullying, anti-school subcultures and truancy.

Participation in full-time education after age 16 is very strongly correlated with results in GCSEs. However young people's attitudes to school are linked not just to their actual level of attainment, but also to their own perception of their ability. The associations between self-perception, attitudes to school and actual attainment can become self-reinforcing, forming a downward spiral.

For many young people, the major motive for staying in education after age 16 is the wish to go to university. However qualitative studies suggest that some young people from working class families hold negative images of university life, regarding it as an alien culture in which they would feel out of place.

Family background

Parents play an important role in shaping young people's attitudes to education. They are also probably the most important source of advice and help when decisions about post-16 routes have to be taken. Other family members, particularly brothers and sisters, are also useful sources of information about post-16 options.

Research suggests that while it is unusual for parents to insist that their child follows a particular route, most young people make choices that accord with their parents' preferences. Parents appear to set the boundaries within which choices are made, so that young people do not even consider some options as possibilities. The parents of young people who leave education at 16 may take a more *laissez-faire* approach to their child's decision-making than the parents of those who stay on.

Both parental occupation and parental education affect the probability of staying in education after 16, particularly for young people with below average GCSE results. Although social class differences amongst parents in views about the importance of education are small, there is evidence that middle class parents can give their children more effective educational support. Low family income and feelings of cultural alienation may also restrict young people's choices.

Gender

More girls stay on in education after 16 than boys, the difference being most marked for those with below average GCSE results. In contrast, girls are much less likely than boys to enter work-based training at 16. A major explanation for this pattern is the segmentation of the youth labour market, which offers better employment opportunities at age 16 to boys than to girls. Differences in the occupational preferences of boys and girls are observed from an early age, and though this pattern may be starting to break down, for the moment it remains very marked.

A further explanation for girls' higher staying on rates in post-16 education is that they appear on average to enjoy school more than boys and to be more willing to accept educational values. Some studies suggest that girls go about the process of choosing post-16 routes more efficiently than boys.

Ethnic group

Young people from all the main minority ethnic groups in the UK are much more likely to stay in full-time education after 16 than young white people, the difference again being particularly marked for those with below average GCSE results. Both 'push' and 'pull' factors seem to be involved. On the negative side is the high risk of unemployment faced by young members of minority ethnic groups relative to whites if they enter the labour market at 16, together with their fear of discrimination by employers. On the positive side are their high career aspirations, particularly in the case of young Asian men, and the great value placed by their communities on education. Many young people from minority ethnic groups show great perseverance, often re-sitting GCSEs in Year 12 in order to improve their grades.

Asian students, who often aim for university entrance, usually prefer to take A levels rather than vocational qualifications. Minority ethnic groups are heavily under-represented in apprenticeships and the higher status work-based training programmes. Although several authors report that Asian and Afro-Caribbean students are not interested in apprenticeships and have negative images of government training schemes, racial discrimination, both actual and feared, may also be a factor in their under-representation in the skilled manual trades.

Young Afro-Caribbean women have a higher rate of participation in education than their male peers. There is evidence that the stereotype of Muslim families as generally opposed to the education of daughters is inaccurate.

Many studies report racism in schools. There is alleged to be a particular problem over the attitudes of teachers towards Afro-Caribbean males, who are seen as less able and more threatening than Asian males. Afro-Caribbeans who stay in education after age 16 are more likely than whites to transfer to FE college. Some authors claim that the treatment of minority ethnic groups in school is a major cause of the development of anti-school subcultures.

Careers education and guidance

Formal careers education and guidance (CEG) appears generally to have less influence on choice at 16 than family. Although there is reasonably firm evidence that good quality CEG can increase young people's careers-related skills, it is hard to establish whether these improved skills in turn make any difference to their choices. CEG may play a somewhat bigger role in course choice, once the initial decision to stay on in education has been made. It may also have a more important role for young people on vocational courses or work-based routes than for A level students.

Research suggests that standards of provision of careers education in schools are variable, and that young people tend to find professional careers advisers more helpful than careers teachers. Young people from minority ethnic groups also appear to find the CEG they are offered less helpful than whites. Some commentators believe that CEG should begin earlier in the secondary school years.

Young people may also receive help and advice from teachers who are not careers specialists. However, while some individual teachers can be influential, they are not generally a major source of help. When teachers do give advice, it is usually to encourage students to stay in full-time education.

The school

National data show substantial differences in staying-on rates between individual schools, even after adjusting for the composition of the student body. There also appear to be

differences between schools in pupils' attitudes towards education. Researchers have so far been unable to explain away these differences in terms of easily measurable characteristics of schools. School 'ethos' - the dominant set of values, attitudes and behaviours in the school - may have an explanatory role, but there is a debate about the usefulness of this concept.

Other things being equal, young people are more likely to stay in education after 16 if they spend Year 11 in a school that has a sixth form. It is easier to stay in the sixth form of the same school than to transfer to college, and competition between institutions for students means that schools tend to encourage students to enter their own sixth forms rather than go elsewhere.

Peer groups

It has been established that young people are more likely to stay in education after 16 if their schoolmates also stay on. The literature suggests that few young people choose a particular post-16 route merely because their friends have chosen it. However friends may help to form their general attitudes towards education, which in turn influence their choices. Friends and siblings can also be a useful source of information about specific options, and their reports may be more vivid and meaningful to young people than formal sources.

Local labour markets

There are substantial geographical differences in staying-on rates, even after allowing for GCSE results, personal characteristics and family background, both between regions and between smaller local areas. These differences may in part be a response to the opportunities that young people see in the local labour market. However the relationship between young people's choices and the local labour market is complex: studies suggest that it involves local industrial structures, the level of the demand for youth labour and relative wage rates for qualified and unqualified youth labour. In addition, young people's responses to local labour market conditions may vary with socio-economic factors in their family and neighbourhood.

Sixth form versus FE college

Specific choices about which courses to take and where to take them seem to be made later than the decision about whether to stay on in education. There is evidence that parents may allow their sons and daughters more freedom with these choices than with the initial decision to stay on, and that friends may have more influence.

The profile of courses taken by students in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges is largely similar, but further education (FE) colleges have a much higher

proportion of students on vocational courses. Year 12 students in FE colleges have on average significantly poorer results in GCSE examinations than students in school sixth forms or sixth form colleges, and this remains true when comparing Year 12 A level students in these institutions.

FE colleges draw half or more of their intake at age 16/17 from schools without sixth forms. Surveys show that students from schools with sixth forms who transfer to FE college give course availability, ease of travel and dislike of school as important reasons for moving. They tend to regard college as a more adult environment than school, and the move gives some young people the chance to make a fresh start. Students who are not wholly committed to staying in full-time education are more likely to choose FE college than students who have no doubts about staying on. In choosing which particular college to attend, students' subjective responses to the college and how it fits with their self-image seem to be important. Choices are also influenced by college marketing strategies.

A levels versus vocational courses

Students who opt for A levels have on average substantially better results in GCSEs than students who choose vocational courses. After allowing for differences in GCSE results, girls and students with parents in low skill occupations are over-represented on vocational courses, and young people from minority ethnic groups are under-represented.

Despite their poorer GCSE results, a large proportion of students doing Advanced GNVQs aim to enter higher education after gaining their qualification rather than to start vocational training. Neither students, teachers or parents appear to believe that there is parity of esteem between A levels and GNVQs. Some commentators argue that GNVQs have become a general education award for young people who do not have the GCSE grades required for entry to A level courses.

Work-based training

The extent to which Year 11 students make a positive choice in favour of work-based training is unclear. The issue is confused by the dual role of government-supported training for young people both as a provider of high quality apprenticeships and as a safety net for those who cannot get jobs. Some researchers believe that young people see work-based training as second best, regarding vocational qualifications as narrow and of little market value. Other research indicates that many young people in work-based training value the chance to earn wages while learning a skill and are happy with the pathway they have taken, particularly if they are on a high quality scheme.

There is evidence that schools tend not to encourage young people to enter work-based training, and that Year 11 students are not generally well informed about

opportunities. The most positive encouragement appears to come from parents who have followed this route themselves.

Implications for research

The evidence base for understanding choice at 16 is not strong. Many issues can only be properly addressed by longitudinal data, but there is no large quantitative longitudinal study with an educational perspective that starts early enough in the secondary school to monitor how decisions are made. There have been several large-scale cross-sectional surveys of secondary school pupils, but they have mostly used self-completion questionnaires administered to whole classes at a time. This survey method, though cheap, limits the quality and depth of the data collected. There have also been many qualitative studies, often based on very small and very local samples. Although these have generated many interesting and influential ideas, it is important to test the generality of their findings in a more systematic fashion. A further weakness in the evidence base for understanding choice at 16 is the lack of survey data with large sample numbers within individual minority ethnic groups. The evidence base will be much strengthened in future years by the DfES's proposed longitudinal study of young people, which promises improvements on several of these fronts.

Certain aspects of choice at 16 seem to be particularly poorly understood. We know that schools influence young people's choices, but which aspects of the school's organisation are important is unclear. We also know that there are large geographical variations in participation rates in post-16 education involving both local labour market and cultural factors, but our understanding of how these operate is limited. As far as specific post-16 options are concerned, we need to know more about the role of GNVQs - do they truly function as an alternative vocational route through full-time education, or do young people use them as second-tier A-levels? There are also differing views about how young people regard work-based training, and research on this topic needs to distinguish more carefully between different types of scheme. Finally, although it is usually assumed that high quality careers education and guidance helps young people to make good choices at 16, there has been no rigorous test in the UK of its actual effectiveness.

1 INTRODUCTION

Background and scope

The choices that young people make about what to do at age 16 when compulsory full-time education ends are of both private and public interest. Their choices affect both their own futures and the supply of educated and trained labour in the economy, and it is a major goal of government policy to increase the number who decide to stay in education and training. Several recent initiatives have this among their aims, including Educational Maintenance Allowances, the Connexions Service and reforms to Modern Apprenticeships. It is therefore helpful if we understand when, how and why young people make their choices about post-16 pathways.

The present report reviews what existing research tells us about this topic. It expands an earlier review commissioned by the DfES for its advisory panel on research issues for the 14-19 age group. The review is largely restricted to research the UK, with the focus mainly on England. During recent years there have been changes to several aspects of the structure of education and training for the post-16 age group, and so most of the studies examined were published within the last decade. However some older studies have been included that offer insights into the more general attitudes and choice processes that underlie young people's decisions.

General approach

The review is guided by some general assumptions about the nature of choices at 16. First, choices at age 16 are the outcome of many factors. Individual abilities and preferences, though crucial, are just part of the picture. Also relevant are the young person's experiences at school, the influence of parents and friends, family income, the information and guidance provided by teachers and careers advisers, the curriculum and learning environment on offer in full-time education and the alternative opportunities available in the labour market for wage-earning or for work-based training. In addition, the young person's gender, ethnicity and social class cannot be ignored, and this in turn raises issues of cultural norms, social networks and possible discrimination. Though for convenience this report discusses these different factors under separate headings, in reality they are closely inter-linked. Moreover, the relative importance of these different factors varies with different individuals and in different circumstances. It is impossible to assign causal priorities amongst them in any general way, or to trace unambiguously the chain of influences and events that produce particular decisions.

Second, the very concept of a decision or a choice may sometimes be inappropriate in this context. True, some young people go about choosing their post-16 route in an explicit fashion, gathering information about alternatives and weighing up the 'pros' and 'cons' in a deliberate way. However, as we shall see, others may act on the

basis of long-standing assumptions about what they will do, without ever properly considering any alternatives. Unfortunately the English language does not offer a word to cover these two extremes of the continuum, and in this report the terms 'choice' or 'decision' must serve for both.

Third, although in theory all young people are free to consider the full range of options that can be taken at 16, in practice, for most, meaningful choices are restricted to particular arenas. For example, the academically successful son of middle-class parents attending a school with a thriving academic sixth form is unlikely to spend much time debating whether or not to stay in full-time education, or even whether to take A level or GNVQ courses: for him, the issue is simply which A level subjects to choose. For young people in this situation, the advantages of staying on to take A levels are so evident that virtually all do so, and we look to unusual individual circumstances to explain the occasional exception. The choice between full-time education and work-based routes and between academic and vocational courses within full-time education is much more real for those in more marginal situations.

For all these reasons, any highly generalised account of decision-making at age 16 is unlikely to be very useful. It is more helpful to look instead at the different ways in which young people make their choices, and at the specific considerations involved in choices of different types. This approach may reveal the potential leverage points through which choices may be influenced.

2 THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

Evidence base

In order to understand young people's choices at age 16, we need to look both at the outcomes of the decision-making process - what kinds of young people choose which options - and also at the decision-making process itself, that is the ways in which young people reach their decisions. Outcomes can be explored satisfactorily through cross-sectional studies of young people in their last year of compulsory schooling or shortly afterwards, at or near the time at which final decisions about post-16 routes have to be made. Cross-sectional studies may also shed some light on the decision-making process, but longitudinal studies following young people over a period of time are better suited to this purpose.

A literature search revealed a number of recent cross-sectional studies dealing with choices at 16. Several are large-scale surveys, mostly using self-completion questionnaires designed to collect information on a range of attitudes and on the explicit reasons that young people give for their preferences. Big sample sizes allow researchers to establish statistical associations with other factors likely to influence choices, such as gender or type of school. The studies often also include questions such as when young people first decided on their choice and who was the most important influence on them. These questions give some useful information about the decision-making process, but they have limitations: they ask the respondent to make retrospective judgements which may well be coloured by subsequent events, and they do not capture the different routes by which final choices are reached.

There are also several cross-sectional studies designed to explore choice at 16 that use qualitative methods of enquiry and are based small, non-representative samples. Sometimes the samples are particularly small and unsystematic, and the evidence that they provide can only be described as anecdotal. Nevertheless at their best these studies include a spread of different types of young people in different types of environments, and use in-depth techniques of data collection and analysis that probe more deeply than is possible with self-completion questionnaires to explore the actual process of decision-making. Despite this, if these studies only collect information at one time point, they cannot avoid relying on possibly biased and partial retrospection.

Unfortunately there are relatively few longitudinal studies of young people in the UK, quantitative or qualitative. The British birth cohort studies are, of course, an exception, but in their case the intervals between sweeps tends to be too long to be helpful in studying processes during the secondary school years. Another major exception, the regular England and Wales Youth Cohort Study, does not contact young people at all until they have already passed the end of compulsory education. The Youth Survey element of the British Household Panel Survey covers 11-15 year olds, but focuses on issues related to health and to psychological and social well-being rather than

education. As a result, the evidence base for understanding how young people choose their post-16 pathways is quite small, and the weight of interpretation placed on it is sometimes quite heavy.

Structuralist models

Research into the decision-making process tends to be guided by a theoretical model of the way in which these choices are made. Three types of model in particular have been influential: structuralist models, economic models, and models of pragmatic rationality.

Gambetta (1996) defines the structuralist model of decision-making as the view that these choices are predominantly the result of constraints - institutional, economic or cultural - over which the young person has no control. Structuralist positions were popular among educationalists and sociologists in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s, and reflected the conditions of the time. Most young people left school at the minimum age, most full-time education after 16 was very academic, the youth labour market was shrinking, traditional apprentice training was in decline, unemployment was high, and government-sponsored training schemes like the Youth Opportunities Programme offered the only realistic alternative for many school leavers.

The structuralist position is exemplified by Ryrie (1981), who followed a cohort of 1,129 students over the last three years of compulsory education in eight Scottish comprehensive schools, collecting information through personal interviews. He found strong correlations between the route that young people took at age 16 and their intentions and attainment three years previously. He concluded that choices about staying or leaving did not usually involve conscious decisions or rational choice, but were based rather on assumptions of long standing:

'During the long period of schooling teachers influence their students in various ways, intentional and unintentional. As a result, young people come to internalise certain expectations, and adopt certain taken-for-granted assumptions. Such mutually accepted assumptions may result in decisions being made about courses or paths to be followed without any conscious choice on the part of individuals…Such decisions apparently happen "naturally", but they are the outcomes of a process which has been going on quietly in the minds of students during the earlier years, and which may have involved taking a series of small steps in a certain direction.'

Ryrie (1981) pp.3-4

As a result, according to Ryrie, the process of decision making became almost automatic:

'…decisions of the young people arose fairly directly from the structure and organisation of the schooling process, and beyond that, from the perceptions and assumptions which lie behind that structure, and not from the individual choice and free decision-making of the students themselves…the controlling concept underlying the whole process is that of "ability".'

Ryrie (1981), p.64

Roberts (1984) has applied a similar framework to the process of occupational choice:

'In the past, the majority of young people travelled along well-sign-posted trajectories. Their home backgrounds and educational streams enabled them to anticipate their initial occupations and the types of adult employment to which these early jobs would lead. Although unsure of which particular occupations they would prefer, the majority were realistic about their levels of employment.'

Roberts (1984), p.39

According to Roberts, 'anticipatory socialization' made adjustment to work quite easy:

'... "careers" has always been an important aspect of education's hidden curriculum. Selection within education has accustomed young people to their awaiting positions in the job hierarchy. Parents are "rarely" able to dispense comprehensive information about national or even local labour markets, but children become familiar with their attitudes towards work and, as a result, know roughly what to expect... In most cases, when jobs were available, there was no clash between the new demands to which beginning workers were exposed, and the latter's aspirations and self-images.'

Roberts (1984), pp. 39-40

The economic model

In sharp contrast to the structural model, the economic or human capital model as developed by Becker (1975) sees education and training choices as investment decisions in which subjects make a rational calculation of the relative returns to each of the different options open to them, the time taken to realise those returns, and risk of failure attached to each option. In recent years the range of options available to 16 year olds who want to stay in full-time education has increased considerably, and sixth forms and colleges have opened up to young people who previously would not have considered this route. This has been brought about by the introduction of GCSE examinations and the consequent growth in the proportion getting good grades at 16, by the development of vocational qualifications within full-time education, and by the promotion of competition for students between schools and colleges (Foskett and Hesketh 1997). This widening of educational choice at 16 has encouraged researchers to consider the applicability of the economic model to decision-making at the end of compulsory schooling.

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) present a carefully argued discussion of how well young people's decision-making matches up to the assumptions of a generalised version of the economic model, the rational choice model. A key assumption of the rational choice model is that 'individuals will seek to maximise the benefits they will gain from the choices they make' (p.29). However the authors argue that because the returns to education and training only accrue over a long period of time, it is difficult to calculate the future returns to investments. A second assumption of the model is that choices are entirely based on self-interest, but the needs that individuals seek to satisfy are not only

economic - in education and training, the need for social status and prestige is also important. The rational choice model also assumes that 'choices will be made after a process of vigilant information collection' (p.29). However complete vigilance is costly in time and effort, and most decisions are based on less than perfect information. It follows that people may be satisfied with a decision that is 'good enough' in the circumstances, rather than one that is demonstrably the most rational choice, thus violating the final assumption of the model 'that the process of considering alternatives and making choice will be entirely rational' (p.29).

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown go on to review research on a range of factors that may affect the degree of rationality involved in any given choice. These include how the choice affects the person's self-esteem, the permanence and importance of the decision, the existence of pre-existing attitudes, values and beliefs that prevent people from considering certain options, and inertia, which encourages them to take the option that is easiest in the short-term. A further obstacle to full rationality is 'dissonance', or 'the existence of contradictory ideas that the individual cannot reconcile' (p.40). This may evoke various strategies to avoid or minimise dissonance, such as ignoring certain facts, selectively seeking information to justify the choice that has been made, postponing making a decision, or shifting responsibility for the decision onto someone else.

Pragmatic rationality

We have seen that although young people's choices at age 16 involve some calculation of costs and benefits, they usually fall short of the pure rationality of the economic model. Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996) developed the concept of 'pragmatic rationality' to capture the nature of such decision-making. Their qualitative study of young people in youth training in the mid 1990s suggested that:

'...the ways in which young people made actual choices about which job placement to take were pragmatically rational... constrained and enabled by their horizons for action... partly determined by external opportunities in the training market... also formed by their own subjective perception... rooted in the identity of the young person.'

Hodkinson, Sparkes and Hodkinson (1996), p.3

The concept is further developed into a theory of career decision-making which the authors claim avoids 'the twin pitfalls of implicit social determinism or of seeing (young) people as completely free agents' (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1997, p.29). This theory involves three elements:

'...(i) pragmatically rational decision-making...; (ii) the interactions with others in the ... field, related to the unequal resources different "players" possess; and (iii) the location of the decisions within the partly unpredictable pattern of turning-points and routines that make up the life course.'

Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997), p.29

The concept of pragmatic rationality echoes the position of Banks *et al*. (1992) when collating the findings of a number of projects under the Economic and Social Research Council's 16-19 Initiative. They describe choice at age 16 as a rational process that is constrained by a realistic perception of opportunities and shaped by individual personality. The authors highlight three elements in choices: the opportunity structure, credentials (including both formal qualifications and other attributes which affect how others treat them), and identity. The first two, they argue, limit the scope for choice; the third influences the real choices that are made.

Hemsley-Brown (1999) endorses the concept of 'pragmatic rationality', arguing that decisions at 16 involve both subjective and objective reasoning skills. She conducted a qualitative longitudinal study of the decision-making process, interviewing 25 pupils from five schools on three occasions spanning Years 10 and 12 in order to explore how they chose which college to attend after age 16. Although all the students gave explicit 'utilitarian' reasons to explain their choices, in-depth study suggested that reality was more complex:

'Interviewees revealed underlying motives for their choice based on, for example, the social class or visual appearance of students - preserving or enhancing "self-image" was an important factor. These reasons were implicit rather than explicit… Students entered the preliminary search stage of the decision-making process with a set of "preconceptions" which affected their willingness to pursue a particular option, and served as a filter mechanism when assimilating information later in the process.'

Hemsley-Brown (1999), pp. 86 and 87

These preconceptions were based on parental and peer group pressure, self-image and group identity, and led the author to conclude that decision-making could not be separated from family background, culture and life-history.

Individual variation in decision-making

Each of the three models of decision-making outlined above is a generalisation, and there is considerable individual variation in how young people make their choices. Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996) constructed a typology to capture how young people went about choosing the institution in which they planned to continue their studies after age 16. Their qualitative study involved interviews with 22 male and female students in Year 11 of a socially mixed urban comprehensive school. Their typology does not claim to be comprehensive - no doubt research in other types of school would throw up further variations - but it offers useful insights.

According to the authors, the degree of rational calculation involved in a particular choice varied from one young person to another. Only the 'active choosers' approached the model of rational decision-making:

'These are the "ideal" student, the thoughtful, well-informed, careful choosers. They typically consider a wide range of post-16 institutions, collect a variety of information, and visit a number of different colleges before making their choice.'

Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996), p.38

Other groups departed from this ideal in various ways. The *'choosers-otherwise'* knew simply that formal education was 'not for them' and tended to absent themselves from careers sessions. *'Choice-avoiders'* were low achievers who 'tend to delay the choice process and avoid, "forget" or ignore formal advice'. For them, choice was threatening, highlighting their marginalised status, and they found it 'more comfortable to inhabit a position of vagueness, indecisiveness and drift'. *'Unstable choosers'* were also low achievers who did actually make choices, but were often very uncertain about them, and were easily swayed. Finally, the *'pre-emptive choosers'* were clear that they did not want to stay on in their current school, but operated 'with a limited and murky view of alternatives'. They made their choice of alternative route 'quickly and on the basis of minimal information', often giving serious consideration to only one other institution and making convenience a major criterion. (All quotations from Macrae, Maguire and Ball 1996, p.38.)

Taylor (1992) conducted semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of 392 Year 11 pupils in 10 Surrey schools. He also contrasted young people who, though still perhaps unsure which path to take, had been building up information about a career field over a period of time, and those who were still very vague about what they would do, even when they had already decided to leave school. Another study that used in-depth interviews with a sample of 208 16 and 17 year olds in different parts of England who had dropped out of their post-16 course or switched courses highlighted the possibility of choice by default:

'Where young people were undecided at the end of Year 11, many were simply forced by the passage of time to choose something to which they were not fully committed.'

Kidd and Wardman (1999),p.267.

Timing of decisions and careers advice

For careers education and guidance to be effective, it needs to be offered before young people have fixed their minds on a particular post-16 path. The question of when decisions are made is thus important, but the evidence on this topic is limited and somewhat mixed. Some older studies indicate that decisions about leaving education at 16 used often to be made relatively early. Ryrie (1981), for example, reports that over two fifths of those who left school at 16 had already decided to leave three years previously. Similarly Varlaam and Shaw's (1984) survey of 1,200 Year 11 students in Inner London secondary schools found that three fifths of those who were intending to leave at 16 said that they had 'always' meant to start work as soon as possible. Both these studies took place before the rapid increase in staying on rates at the end of the 1980s and the widening of full-time education options for young people of average

ability. A later study by Furlong and Cartmel (1995) in four contrasting local labour markets in Scotland found that only one in twenty 13 year olds said that they expected to leave school as soon as possible, while three in ten were still undecided at that age.

Although young people do not need to take final decisions until Year 11, many start to think about their options much earlier. The Post-16 Markets Project, which surveyed 1,284 Year 11 students from several schools, reports that 42% recalled beginning the process of choosing a post-16 route in Year 10 or earlier, with 5% recalling beginning to choose before the age of 13 (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown 2001). It also seems that many reject some options at a fairly early stage. Hemsley-Brown (1999) found that although few of the students in her study had made firm decisions about post-16 routes before Year 10, all had preconceptions about the kind of further education options they were prepared to consider.

It seems that, having once decided whether or not to leave full-time education at 16, most young people do not change their minds. In Ryrie's (1981) Scottish sample, only 4% of those who actually left at 16 had said in their last year at school that they intended to stay on, while 72% of those who did stay on had consistently intended to do so since they were first interviewed three years earlier. A survey in Tower Hamlets of nearly 800 Year 11 students in eleven schools found that very few of those intending to leave changed their minds and stayed on, while about a fifth of the intending stayers changed their minds and left (Kysel, West and Scott 1992). This echoed Ryrie's (1981) finding that more of intending stayers changed their minds and left than the other way round.

Development of occupational preferences

Occupational preferences also start to develop during the early secondary school years. According to Furlong and Cartmel (1995):

'During their early teens, boys and girls move through a stage of active exploration in which they try to "locate" themselves within the constraints of the society in which they are growing up. As their ideas about their academic potential develop, their occupational aspirations become more refined: certain sections of the labour market come to be seen as outside their reach or requiring too much effort to attain, while other jobs come to be seen as lacking in prestige and falling below a level which they find acceptable.'

Furlong and Cartmel (1995), pp.361-362

However ideas about the particular job they would like to do are still very fluid. Kelly (1989) followed a cohort of 1,773 pupils in ten comprehensive schools, with questionnaires at ages 11/12 and 13/14, and postal questionnaires a year after the end of compulsory education. There was very little consistency in job choices over time: only around one in ten in the sample mentioned the same job at age 17 as they had mentioned three years previously, and only one in twenty mentioned the same job as they had mentioned on first entry to secondary school. Ryrie's (1981) Scottish longitudinal study

found that young people's preferences for specific jobs were generally more volatile over time than their intention to leave full-time education at 16. Taylor (1992) also reports that the Year 11 pupils interviewed in Surrey had rather vague ideas about future jobs:

'For the majority of young people, firm decisions about careers and jobs were often a matter for the future, although it was clearly a topic of considerable interest at this stage. In terms of long-term employment and goals, only just over half of young people interviewed displayed good to fair knowledge of the entry requirements/ qualifications for their chosen job or career...'

Taylor (1992), p.328

Explicit reasons for staying and for leaving

Ryrie (1981) regarded the explicit reasons that pupils gave for leaving as 'justifications rather than criteria on which a decision had been based' (p.53); they were in his view *post-hoc* rationalisations rather than motives for action. The model of pragmatically rational choices gives more weight to explicit reasoning than Ryrie's structuralist model, though it accepts an important role for subjective predispositions.

The literature suggests that on the whole, young people have a very instrumental approach to education. The view of the large majority is that school's main purpose is to help them to get qualifications that in turn will help them in their future employment, by enabling them to get jobs or to enter higher education. Evidence of this can be found in Jowett 1995, White, Stratford and Thomas (1996), and in further studies cited by Metcalf (1997). In Taylor's (1992) Surrey sample,

'Great emphasis was placed on qualifications enabling people to obtain a job or a better job, rather than as ends in themselves.'

Taylor (1992), p.321.

It seems to be the general relevance of education to their future careers that is important to young people, rather than its utility for their specific job choices: Ryrie (1981) found that specific job aims played only a small part in young people's decisions about staying or leaving, and we have seen that specific occupational aspirations tend to be fluid.

Research suggests that decisions about post-16 routes may involve number of different factors. This was reported, for example, by Maychell and Evans (1998), who conducted a large national survey of Year 11 pupils in 42 maintained secondary schools in England including in-depth interviews with a small sub-sample, and by Legard, Woodfield and White (2001), who conducted in-depth interviews with a purposively selected sample of over 100 16 and 17 year olds. Nevertheless the explicit reasons that young people give for their choices reflect their largely instrumental approach to education. The consistent message that emerges from a number of large quantitative studies is that young people stay in full-time education after age 16 primarily for career reasons, rather than from a love of learning as an end in itself. A survey of over 4,400 students in sixth forms and colleges reported that the three main reasons chosen for

staying on were: 'improving career prospects in general', 'qualifications necessary for chosen career', and 'wish to go on to higher education' (Vincent and Dean 1977). Very few in this sample said that their main reason for staying was their interest in the subjects that they were studying. A further study of 800 sixth form students in Inner London found that the reason most often given for staying on was to get qualifications in order to improve employment prospects (Dean 1982a). In a questionnaire study of nearly 800 students approaching the minimum leaving age in Tower Hamlets, the three most frequent reasons given by those who intended to stay on all involved the wish to get more qualifications in order to improve employment prospects (Kysel, West and Scott 1992). A follow-up study of young people from 34 inner city schools using postal questionnaires similarly found that the most frequent reasons given by those who stayed in full-time education were 'I wanted to improve my qualifications', 'I want to go to university' and 'I need more qualifications for the job I want' (Hagell and Shaw 1996). Once again, very few stayers cited their interest in the subjects they were studying. Most recently, a questionnaire survey of over 1,400 Year 12 students in schools and colleges showed that the three most important reasons given for staying on were the need to obtain appropriate qualifications to get a job, the wish to carry on studying, and the need to obtain qualifications for university entrance (Keys and Maychell 1998).

Legard, Woodfield and White (2001) found that young people who had clear career goals were the most likely to give instrumental reasons for choices. Those with no specific career goals tended to stay in full-time education,

'Firstly, because their academic performance enabled them to do so, and secondly because they did not yet feel ready or confident enough to leave education and face the responsibilities of a job.'

Legard, Woodfield and White (2001), p.12.

This group was also susceptible to external influences, such as parents and teachers, who tended to support education.

According to Kysel, West and Scott (1992), those who left full-time education at 16 were just as instrumental in their choices as those who stayed:

'For both those who were leaving and those who were staying on, employment considerations were paramount.'

Kysel, West and Scott (1992), p.97.

However leavers tended to attach more weight to immediate work and earnings than to a somewhat distant future career. This is confirmed by the large surveys reported by Dean (1982b), Vaarlam and Shaw (1984), Kysel, West and Scott (1992) and Maychell and Evans (1998), which all found that the wish to go to work and earn money was by far the most frequent reason that young people gave for leaving school at the minimum age.

Instrumental factors also appear to be prominent when young people change their decisions. According to Maychell and Evans (1998), the two factors that intending leavers said were most likely to make them change their minds and stay on in full-time

education were being unable to get a job, and getting better GCSE results than they expected. Ryrie (1981) reports that young people who were still unsure in Year 11 expected to use similar criteria in making up their mind. Kysel, West and Scott (1992) also found that both intending stayers and intending leavers said that their actual examination results could make them change their mind, with both unexpectedly good and unexpectedly bad results capable of changing decisions in either direction.

There is evidence that some young people who leave full-time education at 16, though concerned about their employment prospects, do not believe that staying on would help them to get a job. Furlong's (1993) analysis of attitude data from the 1970 British Birth Cohort led him to conclude that,

'Young people seemed to lack a conviction that the labour market was a fair place in which educational achievements are recognized and rewarded.'

Furlong's (1993), p.93.

There was, it appeared, a feeling amongst some that it was not what you knew but who you knew that mattered, and that getting a job was largely a matter of luck. Hagell and Shaw (1996) report that young people who left school without any GCSE passes were the group most likely to believe that qualifications were irrelevant to getting a job, and indeed in this sample, two fifths of those who found jobs after leaving school at 16 did so through personal contacts. Maychell and Evans (1998) also found that intending leavers were less likely than intending stayers to believe that school was useful for getting a job. Kysel, West and Scott (1992) asked young people to rate the importance of different qualities in obtaining a job. They found that intending stayers,

'...rated academic qualities as more important than anything else. The ratings given to academic qualities by leavers were significantly lower.'

Kysel, West and Scott (1992), p.98.

These survey findings are supported by a qualitative study involving extended interviews with a group of 16 and 17 year olds in South Glamorgan who were not in education, employment or training. Most did not have any qualifications, and according to the authors, for most of these young people this fact:

'...was not an issue of undue concern. Some subscribed to the view that educational achievement is of little value, given that there are no jobs for them. Others argued that you learn more out of school than in it.'

Rees, Williamson and Instance (1996), p.226.

If young people believe that the main point of education is to improve their employment prospects, and yet at the same time believe that better educational qualifications will not help them to get a job, then they are likely to see no reason to stay on after the minimum leaving age. This point is made by the authors of study comparing the attitudes of Year 10 pupils in Sunderland with young people of similar age in the USA and Russia:

'Where the value of education is widely perceived in instrumental terms (i.e. as a means of gaining better employment) an important motivational factor is likely to be the extent to which one truly believes that there is a route from disadvantage.'

Elliott, Hufton, Hildreth and Illushin (1999), p.90.

3 YOUNG PEOPLE'S ATTITUDES TO SCHOOL

Influence of attitudes on choice at 16

According to the concept of 'pragmatic rationality', subjective perceptions and predispositions play a big part in young people's choice of path at age 16. Attitudes to school are important amongst these, for it is obvious that young people are unlikely to want to stay on in full-time education if they have not enjoyed their experiences so far. Keys and Fernandes (1993) review previous research which indicates:

> *'...that disillusion with education, dislike of school and boredom with schoolwork are associated with early leaving and drop-out, and that a belief in the importance of education, liking for school and interest in schoolwork are associated with staying on.'*
>
> Keys and Fernandes (1993), p.I-19.

There is ample evidence of the centrality of attitudes towards school in explaining young people's choices. Keys and Fernandes' (1993) survey of more than 2,000 pupils in Years 7 and 9 from 83 schools in England showed that pupils who had positive attitudes towards school tended to be have high academic aspirations. Maychell and Evans (1998) found that well over a quarter of intending leavers in Year 11 gave as a reason for wanting to leave, 'I just don't like school'. Intending leavers were less likely than those planning to stay on to agree that 'I mostly enjoy being at school', even after controlling for sex, parental occupation and attainment. Kysel, West and Scott (1992) similarly found that intending leavers were less likely than intending stayers to have enjoyed their last year at school, and a further large-scale longitudinal study of young people in four large towns highlighted the link between negative views of education and leaving at the minimum age (Banks *et al.* 1992). Legard, Woodfield and White's (2001) qualitative study also suggested that 'the principle motivation for young people opting for the work-based route was their experience of school' (p.13). Mac an Ghaill (1988) makes a distinction between attitudes towards school and attitudes towards education as such: some young people, he argues, value learning, skills and qualifications, but dislike the institution through which these are normally delivered. They may thus wish to continue their education after age 16, but do not want to stay in school.

The happy majority?

Most surveys of young people's attitudes to school use self-completion questionnaires given to groups of young people in class, thus excluding those who are absent from school on the day of survey. As regular truants are over-represented amongst absentees, these surveys will tend to over-estimate the proportion of pupils with positive attitudes. In addition, the format and wording of questions about attitudes varies from one study to another, making it difficult to quantify young people's views precisely.

Nevertheless the evidence suggests that the majority are reasonably happy at school. For example, in the Health Education Authority's questionnaire survey of a random sample of over 10,000 pupils from Year 7 up to Year 11 drawn from 70 secondary schools in England, nearly three quarters of respondents said they liked school 'a lot' or 'a bit' (Hasleden, Angle and Hickman 1999). The national survey of Year 7 and 9 pupils carried out by Keys and Fernandes (1993) found just under two thirds agreeing that 'I am very happy when I am at school' and more than three quarters agreeing that 'On the whole I like being at school'. In the data collected by Keele University's Centre for Successful Schools, a non-random sample covering more than 30,000 secondary school pupils, nearly 90% of young people said that they were happy at school. In addition, 80% said that they worked as hard as they could, and 80% thought that the school that they attended was a good one. Over 90% believed that their school work was important, and about three-quarters thought that they got on well with their teachers (Barber 1996). Even in Newham, where there were high levels of social disadvantage, nearly two thirds of a sample of over 1,000 pupils from Years 8 and 10 of four secondary schools agreed that 'On the whole I like being at school' (Jowett 1995). Morris *et al.* (1999), in their literature review of young people's attitudes, cite further studies that support their general conclusion that 'for the majority of students, attitudes to school are positive' (p.11).

However Barber (1996) argues that the positive picture presented by these large scale surveys is deceptive, and that other attitudes expressed by the pupils in the Keele database do not accord with it. He reports, for example, that 'almost a third take the view that they would rather not go to school' (p.79). This is echoed by Keys and Fernandes (1993): nearly a third of Year 9 pupils in their national random sample also agreed that 'Most of the time I don't want to go to school'.

Problem areas

The general picture therefore of attitudes towards school is rather mixed. Though the majority seem happy enough and believe that school is worthwhile, there are often other things that they would rather be doing. In addition there is an important minority who dislike school a lot. Symptoms of their negative attitudes, claims Barber (1996), include widespread truancy, bullying and disruptive behaviour in class. Other problem areas that are mentioned repeatedly in the literature are dissatisfaction with the school curriculum, relationships with teachers, and anti-school subcultures amongst pupils.

Truancy

Truancy is perhaps the most direct behavioural expression of negative attitudes towards school, and the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study shows that truancy in Year 11 is significantly associated with leaving full-time education at age 16, even after GCSE results, home background and other factors have been taken into account (Payne 1998). Maychell and Evans (1998) found a significant difference in levels of truancy between intending stayers and leavers in Year 11, after adjusting for sex, social class and expected

level of achievement in GCSEs. Kysel, West and Scott (1992) also found that intending leavers had a much poorer attendance record than intending stayers.

There is ample evidence of high truancy rates, especially in inner cities. In the very large nationally representative sample of young people covered the Youth Cohort Study, nearly three fifths of those in the bottom third of attainment at GCSE said they had played truant at some time during their last year at school. Even amongst those in the top third of attainment, one quarter had played truant at least once (Payne 2000). Keys and Fernandes (1993) report that nearly a quarter of Year 9 pupils in their national sample said that they had played truant at some time during the current school year. In the Newham study, over 30% of Year 10 pupils said that they had played truant at some time during the current school year (Jowett 1995). In all three of these studies, truants were under-represented in the sample, and real levels of truancy are likely to be higher.

Morris *et al.* (1999) conclude from their research review that truancy is more often due to a wish to avoid particular lessons than to a general dislike of school. However, even fairly low levels of truancy have been shown to be significantly associated with leaving full-time education at age 16 (Payne 1998, Maychell and Evans 1998).

Bullying

Bullying is also linked to negative attitudes towards school. Obviously, the victims of bullying are unlikely to enjoy school, but in addition pupils who dislike school are more likely than those who like school to have bullied others (Hasleden, Angle and Hickman 1999). Bullying was commonplace in their large national sample: half of pupils reported having been bullied at some time in the past and one in five reported being bullied during the current term. Similarly, in the Newham sample, about a third of pupils reported being bullied during the current school year, including 6% who were bullied 'quite often' or 'often' (Jowett 1995). Morris *et al.* (1999) review further studies that indicate that bullying is widespread.

Behaviour in school

Disobedience, insolence and indiscipline in class are also clear evidence of negative attitudes towards school. In the Keele database, around three in ten secondary school pupils said that they behaved badly in class 'sometimes' or 'often'. One in three pupils said that others in their classes disrupted lessons every day, and nine in ten said that their lessons were disrupted 'sometimes' (Barber 1996). Keys and Fernandes (1993) present a somewhat more positive picture, but still only 6% of the Year 9 pupils in their sample said that every one of their teachers could keep order in class, and 8% said that none or hardly any could keep order. In addition, 17% admitted to being 'sometimes badly behaved' in class and around school. The large number of exclusions from school also indicates that extreme examples of bad behaviour in school are not uncommon.

Relationships with teachers

Although Morris *et al.* (1999) quote studies indicating that most pupils have positive attitudes towards their teachers, they also cite a range of studies to the effect that some

groups of pupils have very negative views. Not surprisingly, these show that poor teacher-pupil relationships are associated with disruptive behaviour in class, truancy and drop-out from school. A literature review by Mortimore (1991) highlights some of the difficulties in teacher-pupil relationships:

'There is evidence from several studies of secondary age pupils of their negative attitudes towards teachers, particularly by young working class pupils. There are claims that teachers "picked on them" whilst favouring those with "posh" accents…Similarly, negative attitudes are expressed towards school rules; these are considered "stupid" and "petty".'

Mortimore (1991), p.19.

Pomeroy's (1999) in-depth study of 33 students of secondary school age who had been permanently excluded from school found that a large number had experienced difficult relationships with teachers. The author notes how a number felt that their teachers had not given them enough attention and did not value them. Similar accounts of believing themselves to be neglected and unimportant - in the words of one young person, 'flung aside, forgotten children' - can be found in Gow and McPherson's (1980) collation of comments made by respondents to the Scottish School Leaver Surveys. Keys and Fernandes (1993) also review research that indicates that one of the main reasons that students give for not liking school is their dislike of particular teachers or certain types of teacher. Nevertheless several of these studies mention how even very disaffected pupils may name one or two teachers whom they exempt from their general criticisms.

The curriculum

As with relationships with teachers, the general picture regarding attitudes towards the curriculum is of a reasonably contented majority, but with some groups of pupils who are highly dissatisfied. Keys and Fernandes (1993) found that more than nine in ten of the Year 9 pupils in their national sample agreed that 'School work is worth doing' and disagreed that 'School is a waste of time for me', though they tended to have more favourable attitudes towards the value of school work in general than towards particular lessons. Once again, Barber (1996) reports rather less favourable attitudes:

'Almost 60% of pupils agree that they "count the minutes" to the end of their lessons. Over 20% believe that work is boring. Over 40% believe lessons are too long.'

Barber (1996), p.79

Mortimore (1991) summarizes a range of studies suggesting that a number of secondary school pupils consider the curriculum to be:

'...irrelevant…not sufficiently practical… too academic for their (intended) working class jobs… "boring" and "futile".'

Mortimore (1991), p.19.

The research review conducted by Keys and Fernandes (1993) indicated that low achieving pupils were particularly likely to complain of boredom. Hollands (1990)

interviewed 200 young people as part of an ethnographic study of youth training schemes in the West Midlands. He describes their memories of their schooling as follows:

'Three main experiences of schooling most often recalled by trainees were: (a) the desire to leave school and move into work; (b) a resentment of the inapplicability of the education curriculum and criticism of schooling relations and exams; and (c) making the best of a bad situation, "muckin' about" and having a good time as they reached the end of their compulsory time in education.'

Hollands (1990), p.28

Hustler (1988) paints a very similar picture when describing the views on conventional schooling that were expressed by pupils involved in Manchester's Alternative Curriculum Strategies Project for 14-16 year olds. These young people preferred the alternative curriculum that was being trialled because they 'didn't have to sit down and write all the time' and they 'weren't told what to do all the time'; they 'didn't have teachers nagging all the time'; instead teachers treated them 'more as an adult, a person', they 'weren't like teachers' (p.74).

Anti-school subcultures

Mortimore's (1991) review of research on young people who leave school without any qualifications suggests that as a consequence of these attitudes, some young people:

'... develop their own counter-culture in opposition to the dominant school culture…There are considerable skills devoted to counter-culture manifestations, described by Bernstein as "resistance to discipline, avoidance techniques…operating just on the margin of acceptable conduct".'

Mortimore (1991), p.19.

Furlong (1991) argues that young people often evolve a subculture as a coping response to 'emotional injuries' that they have suffered at school: 'in other words, they evolve a social solution to their psychological problem' (p.305). According to Furlong, the form that these subcultures take can vary enormously depending on the cultural resources to hand, and this review looks later at anti-school subcultures among some minority ethnic groups. Their relevance for understanding choices at 16 is that they:

'...give pupils a rationale, a philosophy, a way of exploring and dealing with their experience of schooling. By taking part in a subculture they may be able to find legitimate reasons for valuing different knowledge, for aspiring to different futures, and for valuing different ways of behaving. The problem for the school is that once pupils have evolved subcultures, once they have a rationale for rejecting school, then they are much more difficult to bring back on line.'

Furlong (1991), p.306

Rutter *et al.* (1979), reviewing research on the development of anti-school peer groups, remark that:

'The process need not necessarily involve a subculture which is actively anti-school or pro-delinquency but rather there may be the formation of peer groups within the school which are indifferent to academic success - indifferent because they see no chance of their achieving success and hence they need to set their goals in other directions.'

Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Ouston (1979), p.201.

Changes in attitudes with age

As the development of anti-school subcultures illustrates, negative attitudes towards school can become self-reinforcing. There are other obvious mechanisms: negative attitudes may produce disruptive behaviour in class, evoking sanctions that in turn increase the pupil's hostility, or lead to persistent truancy, thus removing the pupil from the influence of the school. Streaming and setting by ability within schools may also contribute to this reinforcement process. Wright's (1986) ethnographic study shows how the attitudes that pupils are perceived by teachers to hold influence their allocation to streams independently of their ability, while Berends (1995), using data from a very large national longitudinal study of high school students in the USA, demonstrated that the school practice of educational stratification tended to polarise student attitudes into pro- and anti-school orientations. Mortimore (1991), on the basis of her literature review on low achievers, suggests how the relationship between attitudes and attainment may create a downward spiral:

'...for some pupils the entire experience of their statutory years of schooling is one of failure. Not surprisingly, such pupils may develop a poor self-concept in relation to their academic work, lack of motivation and behavioural problems...pupils with a higher rate of learning/behavioural difficulties in one year tended to make less progress in reading over the next year. Similarly, pupils with lower reading scores in one year tended to show an increase in behavioural and learning difficulties.'

Mortimore (1991) p.19

There is much evidence that attitudes towards school tend to become more negative as young people progress through secondary education. According to Barber (1996), pupil attitudes are predominantly positive at the start of secondary education, but take a downwards slide over the next two years. Motivation slumps further in Year 9, reaching its lowest point in Year 10, before rising a little in Year 11 as pupils prepare for GCSE examinations. A symptom of this slide in attitudes is the increase in truancy rates as pupils progress through secondary school, evidenced for example by Jowett (1995), Keys and Fernandes (1993), Maychell and Evans (1998) and Barber (1996).

The deterioration in attitudes is confirmed by survey results. In the Newham sample, Year 10 pupils were less likely than Year 8 pupils to agree that 'On the whole I like being at school' (Jowett 1995). Hasleden, Angle and Hickman's (1999) large national survey reported 'a growing alienation as young people progress through school', evident on many of the attitude dimensions that they measured (p.34). Maychell and Evans (1998) also reported that students in Year 11 had less positive attitudes towards

enjoyment of school and its usefulness than pupils in Year 8. Keys and Fernandes (1993) also concluded that in general, their findings showed that students' levels of motivation towards schooling were lower in Year 9 than in Year 7.

All the above studies are cross-sectional. Blatchford (1996) conducted a rare quantitative longitudinal though small-scale study of around a hundred children from relatively deprived and racially mixed Inner London schools, with interviews at ages 7, 11 and 16. He cautiously concluded that attitudes towards school were relatively fluid in the primary school but became more fixed in secondary school.

Young people's growing disillusionment with school is vividly illustrated by ethnographic studies. Furlong (1991) describes a 'continuum of resistance' towards school, leading up to a moment of choice or transition when the young person finally reaches the 'end of the line' and withdraws allegiance from school. Hollands' (1990) study of youth trainees concluded:

'Many remembered their initial entry to school as one of general conformity, followed by a transitional period whereby the last few years were seen as a "waste of time".'

Hollands (1990), p.33.

Another ethnographic study of 26 16-17 year olds in South Glamorgan who were not in education, training or employment highlighted how long-standing their dislike of school had been:

'*For the substantial majority, disaffection from the educational system was deeply rooted long before the minimum school leaving age.'*

Rees, Williams and Instance (1996), p.226

Self-perceptions of ability

The results that young people expect to get in public examinations taken at age 16 play a very large part in their choice of route at age 16. The independent impact of attainment on route choice is established by statistical models which control for a large number of confounding factors and which are based on very large, nationally representative samples. Similar results are obtained from the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study (Payne 1998; Dolton *et al.* 1999) and from the Scottish School Leaver Surveys (Paterson and Raffe 1995; Raffe, Croxford and Brannen 2001). To illustrate the importance of attainment in choices, by the mid-1990s, almost all 16 year olds in England and Wales who got eight or more A-C grades at GCSE stayed on in full-time education, compared to little more than a quarter of those with no GCSE passes (Payne 1998). Moreover, when GCSEs replaced the previous stratified examination system, the increase in the proportion of 16 year olds getting good examination results was one of the factors that led to a substantial increase in post-16 participation rates in England and Wales (Pratten, Robertson and Tatch 1997; Ashford, Gray and Tranmer 1993; Payne 1995).

Expectations about examination results rest on self-perceptions of academic ability. However Ryrie's (1981) view that young people's 'decision to leave or to stay arose automatically from their awareness of their performance within the school system' (p.54) is probably too deterministic. Maychell and Evans (1998) found a correlation between Year 8 pupils' perceptions of their ability and their intentions to stay or leave at the end of Year 11, but there was much variation: three quarters of pupils planning to leave saw their academic ability as 'average or below', but so also did half of those planning to stay, while a quarter of intending leavers saw their ability as 'above average'.

Attitudes towards school and self-perceptions of ability are intimately bound together, and seem likely to be self-reinforcing. Furlong's (1993) statistical modelling of data from the 1970 Birth Cohort showed a very strong association between academic attainment and attitudes to school. He describes the impact on route choice:

'By the age of 16, working class pupils, those with few academic achievements and young women had developed frames of reference which might inhibit them from seeking the qualifications which would allow them to gain entry to the most rewarding positions within the labour market. These young people had often developed negative attitudes towards school…as well as impressions about their own abilities and potential which reinforced their tendency to apply for unskilled jobs. While many young people from lower working class backgrounds and with poor academic achievements had positive attitudes towards work, their impressions about their own abilities and potential are likely to serve as impediments... It is difficult to overcome a reluctance to undertake post-compulsory education among young people who have a negative attitude towards schooling, especially if these young people also see themselves as having narrow skills and potential.'

Furlong (1993), p.59

Other work supports Furlong's position. A large national survey found that young people who liked school were more likely to think that their teacher rated their school performance as 'very good' than those who disliked school. Moreover, three-quarters of those who thought their teachers rated their performance as 'very good' expected to stay in education after 16 compared to around two-fifths of those who thought that they were rated 'below average' (Hasleden, Angle and Hickman 1999). The regular Scottish School Leaver Surveys also show that, other things being equal, young people who did well in examinations at age 16 were more likely to have enjoyed their last year at school and to think that it had been worthwhile (Gow and McPherson 1980). Hagell and Shaw (1996) report that the higher the pupil's GCSE scores, the more positive they felt about school. Similarly, Blatchford's (1996) longitudinal study showed a correlation between academic self-concept and positive attitudes towards school.

Attitudes towards higher education

As we have seen, an important reason why young people stay on in full-time education after 16 is that they wish to go on to higher education. If higher education is not viewed as an option, then they have less incentive to stay on. Hutchings and Archer (2001) and

Metcalf (1997) review a range of potential obstacles to university entrance, including expectations of success in A levels, worries about the costs of a university education, differential levels of information about higher education and differences in the advice given by schools. Another potential barrier is the image of university life that some young people hold. Heathfield and Wakeford (1993) studied academically able teenagers who had either decided to leave school at 16 or were unsure about staying on. They explored their images of university through drama, role play and writings:

'Their picture of higher education, based heavily on media images, is of a foreign world. Though typified in various ways it conveys the message that it is not a way of life congenial to these students. All images are negative - students are dissolute, superior, or just part of a different culture...'

Heathfield and Wakeford (1993), p.52.

A further study was based on group discussions with young people of working-class origins who were not in higher education (Archer and Hutchings 2000). The foreign nature of university to people of this background also emerged from these discussions:

'The historical domination of higher education by middle-class groups has ... positioned it as an "unknown" and "alien" (and therefore less desirable or "thinkable") culture to working-class groups'.

Archer and Hutchings (2000) p.557.

Although the discussants largely agreed that getting a degree brought economic returns,

'Applying and getting to university was talked about as an uncertain (risky) process, which could cost considerable time, money and effort, at the end of which entry may not be guaranteed'.

Archer and Hutchings (2000) p.560.

The majority of respondents saw university 'as 'boring', very 'hard work', involving lots of 'pressure and stress and as 'a period of considerable poverty' (p.560) - with a real risk of failing to get a degree at the end of it all. There were also concerns about 'losing one's working-class cultural identity' (p.570). In a further article based on the same research the authors report that respondents had two different images of higher education (Hutchings and Archer 2001). The image of Oxbridge and the campus universities was found attractive but seen as beyond their reach, while the inner-city ex-polytechnics were thought to be within their reach, but were seen as offering lower standards and less likely to lead to a good job.

4 PARENTS

Parental influence

Parental influence on choice at 16 can take several forms. Obviously family background affects the chances of getting good GCSE results, which, as we saw earlier, have a major impact on post-16 routes. Over and above this, parents have a pervasive influence in shaping young people's attitudes to education over a long period of time, so that the broad direction of what they will do at 16 is simply taken for granted. In addition, parents may give specific advice at the time that a decision must be made, and they can give help and support of various kinds, including getting information about different options and providing contacts.

The general and long-term influence of parents on young people's attitudes to education is demonstrated by several studies. Furlong's (1993) analysis of the 16 year old sweep of the 1970 British Birth Cohort showed that parental interest and involvement in the school was associated with positive attitudes towards education on the part of their children, even after controlling for level of attainment. Mortimore's review of the literature on unqualified school leavers concluded that,

'School pupils are affected by family attitudes towards the value of schooling. In some cases the family (or at least one parent) exerts such a powerful influence that this exceeds that of culture or class.'

Mortimore (1991), p.22.

Kelly's (1989) large longitudinal study of how young people's career preferences develop found evidence of parental influence on job aspirations:

'14 year olds' perceptions of the sort of job their parents wanted them to get were much more strongly predictive of their aspirations at 17 than the children's own wishes at the earlier age.'

Kelly (1989), p.197.

The review on attitudes to education by Keys and Fernandes (1993) showed that 'lack of parental interest and support were related to early leaving and dropout' (p.I-44). Their own national survey of secondary school pupils showed a significant link between parental interest and support and young people's attitudes to school.

These findings from quantitative studies are supported by qualitative work. For example, a study involving semi-structured interviews with 20 parent-child pairs in South Wales concluded that families continued to play an important role in the transition from initial to post-compulsory education and training (Gorard, Rees and Fevre 1999). Similarly, a qualitatitive study of A level students in East Anglia found that working class parents could still be influential even when they were not involved in formal aspects of schooling:

'Mother-daughter relationships seemed to favour girls' educational achievement in three main inter-connected ways: (a) by emphasising independence, (b) by providing emotional support, and (c) by influencing girls' values.'

Mann (1998), p.211.

Parents are also probably the most important source of advice and help when decisions about post-16 routes have to be taken. Maychell and Evans (1998) found that when Year 11 students in their national survey were asked who they talked to about their careers plans, parents were named far more often than either friends, teachers or careers advisers. Similarly, in the 16-year old sweep of the 1970 Birth Cohort, more young people cited parents as sources of help and advice about jobs, careers or further education than cited any other source (Furlong 1993). Keys and Fernandes (1993) found that nine out of ten Year 9 pupils talked to their parents about their career plans 'often' or 'sometimes'. The Surrey survey reported that two-thirds of Year 11 pupils said that in deciding on their post-16 options they received 'a lot of help' from their family - many more than cited any other source of help (Taylor 1992). In the Youth Cohort Study, over two-thirds of young people said that their family had helped to make decisions about what to do at the end of Year 11, twice as many as said that careers teachers or careers officers had helped (Witherspoon 1995). Taylor (1992) stresses the importance of families as a source of careers information and guidance:

'The family was the key, and often the single most important informal source of guidance, information and influence... Mothers played an especially instrumental information-seeking role.'

Taylor (1992), p.319.

In looking at family influences on choice at 16, we should not forget family members other than parents. Keys and Fernandes (1993) found that more than two fifths of Year 9 pupils in their national sample talked to brothers and sisters, and more than two fifths to other family members. Similarly Taylor (1992) reported that:

'Siblings' current or recent experience of further or higher education, Youth Training or a job could be a more precise source of information than that of parents'

Taylor (1992), p.319.

Whose decision?

While parents clearly share in decision-making at age 16, it is unusual for them to impose their view on their child. In their large sample of students on post-16 courses, less than 2% cited 'parental pressure' as their main reason for staying on (Vincent and Dean 1977). More recently, another large national sample of Year 11 pupils was asked, 'Who made the choices about post-16 education?' In reply, only 2% named their parents, while more than three quarters said they made the decision themselves and a fifth said that the decision was a joint one (Foskett and Hesketh 1997). While two fifths of this sample said that their parents had some influence on their choice of post-16 route, fewer than one in

ten said that their parents were the single most important influence. Mangan, Adnett and Davies (2000) also report that hardly any young people in their sample of Year 11 students said that the decision about whether to stay in the school sixth form or move to college had been taken by their parents alone, though two thirds had taken their parents' views into account. These researchers felt that the parent was 'a fairly active partner in the decision taking' (p.23). Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996) concluded from their qualitative study that:

'Most parents appear simply to oversee their 16 year olds' decisions. Many students talked of being "trusted" by their parents to make sensible choices.'

Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996), p.39.

There is some evidence that the parents of young people who leave full-time education at 16 tend to have a more *laissez-faire* approach than the parents of those who stay in education. The survey by Kysel, West and Scott (1992) in Tower Hamlets found that while a third of those intending to stay on gave 'My parents want me to stay on' as one of their reasons for staying, only a tenth of intending leavers cited 'My parents want me to leave' among their reasons. A quarter of intending stayers agreed that their parents wanted them to do 'whatever I want/think best', compared to half of intending leavers.

Despite the lack of compulsion, it seems that relatively few young people act against their parents' wishes, and when they do so, it is usually because they want to leave education while their parents wish them to stay on. In the Tower Hamlets study, only 1% of Year 11 students who intended to stay on said that their parents wanted them to leave and get any job they could, while 11% of those intending to leave said that their parents wanted them to stay in full-time education. Foskett and Hesketh maintain that, although parents do not normally compel their sons or daughters to take a particular route, they nevertheless set the boundaries within which young people make their choices:

'...the decisions ... [that students] make are made within frames of reference defined by their parents. Some options, whether of institution, course or career aspiration, will be excluded as possibilities by parents, but pupils will be able to make relatively unconstrained choice within non-excluded options... Parents have "...more a veto decision than anything else".'

Foskett and Hesketh (1997) p.308

This view is also taken by Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000) on the basis of their qualitative study of a London comprehensive school. They argue that although working class parents may be less able than middle class parents to intervene directly in the choice process,

'...nevertheless, most of the young people operate within a "framed field of reference"..., loose or tight, established by their parents. While some working-class parents do attempt to establish tighter "frames of references" for their children's

choices, among the middle-class respondents tightness of frame was the norm, although in either case this framing could be resisted or ignored.'

Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000), p.144

Parental attitudes to education

There is less work on parents' attitudes to education than on young people's attitudes, presumably because it is more difficult and expensive to collect data from parents than from their children, who are already conveniently gathered together in school. Much of the evidence comes from students' reports of what their parents think rather than from the parents themselves. The general conclusion from research is that most parents hold positive attitudes towards education and support their children in their education.

In one very large nationally representative sample, nearly four out of five pupils said that their parents always encouraged them to do well at school, and nearly seven out of ten said that their parents were always ready to help if they had a problem at school. The large majority also felt that their parents were willing to come to school and talk to teachers (Hasleden, Angle and Hickman 1999). Keys and Fernandes (1993) found that parents showed a high level of support and interest in their children's education: nine out of ten Year 9 pupils in sample said that their parents were always or nearly always interested in how they did at school. Three quarters said that their parents came to school parents' evenings, also large majority said their parents made sure that they did their homework and wanted them to behave well in school. Even in a sample that included many students from a very deprived area of Inner London, 96% agreed that 'My parents think that it is important for me to do well at school', and 72% said that 'My parents make sure I do my homework' (Jowett 1995). West, Davies and Scott (1992) carried out a small longitudinal study involving the parents of pupils in 28 schools in Inner London, interviewing them annually throughout their child's compulsory secondary education. They reported that parents' views on the aims of schooling:

'...remained remarkably stable ... nearly all continued to place great emphasis on the school's role in enabling their child to obtain qualifications for work, college or university.'

West, Davies and Scott (1992), p.131.

5 DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

Young people's choices of pathway after age 16 divide quite markedly according to three demographic factors: family socio-economic status, gender and ethnic group. The causes of these divisions appear to be quite complex, and involve both economic and cultural factors.

Socio-economic status

A number of studies, some of which are reviewed by Brooks (1998), show that higher parental socio-economic status increases the probability that a 16 year old will stay on in full-time education. The difference is big: in a large national sample of young people who reached the end of compulsory schooling in summer 1999, 82% of the children of parents managerial, professional, associate professional and technical occupations stayed on in education, compared to 60% of the children of parents in semi-skilled and unskilled manual occupations (Payne 2001b). The relationship between parents' socio-economic status and their child's participation in post-compulsory education has also been established in longitudinal data (Micklewright 1989; Rumberger 1983).

Part of the social class difference in staying on rates is due to social class differences in attainment, but a gap remains after differences in attainment have been taken into account. The gap is observed even amongst young people in the top third of GCSE results, but it increases as GCSE results get poorer (Payne 2001b). Both parental occupation and parental education play an independent role, net of GCSE results and other confounding factors (Payne 1998).

The cause of the gap does not appear to lie in social class differences amongst parents in views about the general importance of education, which research suggests are comparatively small. According to one large national survey, there was a gap of just four percentage points between children from higher and lower social classes in the proportion who said that their parents 'always' or 'often' encouraged them to do well at school, with a corresponding gap of five percentage points in the proportion who said that their parents were willing to come to school and talk to teachers (Hasleden, Angle and Hickman 1999).

However, while working-class parents see the value of education, they may not be able to give as much support to their children as middle-class parents. As Hatcher (1998) says:

'Actual probabilities of success at given levels of attainment are higher for middle-class pupils ... because of their parents' greater cultural capital, as measured by parental education levels. Parental cultural capital enhances success probability through two mechanisms. One is knowledge about the education system, which

facilitates strategic behaviour ... The second mechanism is the more effective help that middle-class parents are able to give with their children's school work. In addition, the social networks among higher-class children and parents are effective in facilitating diffusion processes of information about education and destinations, practical help and support, and shared aspirations for higher levels of education'.

Hatcher (1998), p.10.

This view is supported by studies indicating that middle class parents take a more interventionist approach to their children's education than working class parents. Reay (1996 and 1998), for example, studied the way in which parents involved themselves in the choice of a secondary school for their child. Having interviewed 20 mothers of 11 year olds in two primary schools, one predominantly working class, the other almost entirely middle class, she concluded that:

'While all the mothers helped children with schoolwork and talked to teachers, it was only the middle class mothers who had the power and resources to act effectively to shape the curriculum offered to their children.'

Reay (1998), p.195

West *et al.* (1998) found that well-educated mothers were particularly interventionist in the last year of primary school. They were, for example, more likely to use workbooks to supplement their child's school work, and to employ private tutors. Another in-depth qualitative study that followed students through Year 11 and on into the third post-compulsory year found that:

'Some parents (typically the middle-class) have clear aspirations for their children and are pro-active and interventionary in choice-making at 16 and beyond. Others (typically working-class) cede decision-making to their child while expressing concerns or giving their backing to the choices explored by their sons and daughters. For those parents who have no personal experience of further education…purposeful intervention is difficult.'

Ball, Maguire and Macrae (2000), p.144.

Cultural differences between social classes also influence young people's own attitudes and predisposition, which help to shape their choices. Kelly (1989) shows that at age eleven, the top ten most popular jobs were broadly similar for middle-class and working-class children, but thereafter their occupational aspirations diverged. Hemsley-Brown (1999) describes how young people's choice of which college to attend after age 16 was influenced by the social class of the students there. In addition, reference has already been made to work on how an image of university as culturally alien may deter some young people from applying (Archer and Hutchings 2000; Heathfield and Wakeford 1993).

Obviously, social class is correlated with family income, and there is evidence that this is an influence in a minority of cases. In the Tower Hamlets survey, 4% of intending leavers gave 'My family can't afford for me to stay on' as one of the reasons

for their decision (Kysel, West and Scott 1992). A qualitative study of young people in the first year after the end of compulsory education and their parents found that:

'Parents of young people continuing in education mostly confirmed their willingness to fund their child through further education though parents in the lower and middle income bands were more likely than those in the higher income band to stress the financial burden that this imposed on them'

Legard, Woodfield and White (2001), p.15.

These authors report that financial issues sometimes deterred young people in the lowest income band from staying on. Evidence has already been reviewed showing the weight that young people who leave school at the earliest opportunity attach to immediate earnings. Even if their families could afford to let them stay in education, the prospect of earnings is likely to be a particular lure to young people from low-income families.

The formal evaluation of the pilots for mandatory Educational Maintenance Allowances (EMAs) related to family income estimates that EMAs would lead to a national increase in participation in full-time education at age 16 of 3.8 percentage points (Ashworth *et al.* 2002). This effect was concentrated in urban areas, amongst young people from the poorest families and amongst young people with lower levels of attainment at GCSE, and appeared particularly to encourage the take-up of vocational courses and one-year courses. Maguire, Maguire and Heaver (2002) found that colleges in EMA pilot areas reported an increased take-up of foundation level courses which they attributed to EMA, though local training providers were concerned that EMA had led to a fall in application rates for work-based training.

In addition to any direct impact, family income may also play a role in choices at 16 through its effect on plans for higher education. As we have seen, a frequent reason for staying in education after 16 is the wish to go to university. If young people are deterred from this by the cost, they may see no point in staying on. The potential importance of this factor is shown by a large national sample of students in their last compulsory year of education, in which 14% said the costs of going to university would put them off 'a lot' and 37% said it would put them off 'a little' (Connor *et al.* 1999).

Gender

More girls stay on in full-time education after 16 than boys, and the gap between the sexes has persisted for some years. Although girls get on average better GCSE results than boys, Youth Cohort Study data show that girls are still more likely to stay on, even after taking this fact into account. The gender gap is concentrated amongst young people with poorer GCSE results, sex differences in staying-on rates being negligible amongst those with five or more A-C grades (Payne 2001b). Outside of full-time education there are also marked sex differences in the pathways taken, with young women much less likely than males to enter work-based training, particularly Advanced Modern Apprenticeships (Payne 2001a).

It seems likely that a major explanation of these differences lies in gender segregation in the youth labour market, including both jobs and government-supported training (Payne 1995; Department for Education and Employment 1999). The male dominated craft apprenticeships were traditionally entered immediately after reaching minimum leaving age, while one-year courses in post-compulsory education have become a standard entry route for girls aiming for secretarial jobs (Payne 1995). Biggart's (2002) analysis of data from the Scottish School Leavers Surveys showed that female school leavers with poor qualifications had higher unemployment rates, lower participation in training and lower pay than poorly qualified male leavers. He argues that:

'Low-attaining males have benefited from sheltered entry points within particular segments [of the youth labour market], whereas low-attaining females, although fewer in number, appear to be sidelined by employers in favour of adult women and better-qualified school leavers'.

Biggart (2002), p.145.

Gendered occupational preferences are observed from an early age. Kelly's (1989) large longitudinal study collected information in Years 7 and 9, and again one year after reaching school leaving age. At all three points girls were considering very different occupations from boys, and the few whose choices crossed sex lines at age 17 showed no signs of such innovative thinking at an earlier date. Asking girls what their ideal job would be if they were the opposite sex revealed that 'they saw their options as massively constrained by their sex' (p.187). There is some evidence that the influence of gender on occupational choices is starting to break down. Francis (2002) conducted a qualitative study of Year 10 and 11 pupils in London, and concluded that girls now consider a far wider range of occupations than they reported in studies in the early 1980s. She found that girls are more interested in entering professional jobs than they used to be, and are more willing to consider jobs traditionally performed by males. However the differences in the occupational choices of males and females remains strong. According to Francis, even today ,

'...a gender dichotomy exists in secondary students' choices, manifesting in a tendency for girls to opt for creative or 'caring' jobs, and boys for scientific, technical or business-oriented occupations.'

Francis (2002), p.80.

Similarly, a questionnaire study of grammar school girls aged 15-17 in Kent found that:

'The education and career plans of these young women were influenced by their anticipated role as a mother and their perception of social pressure to give up work and care for their children.'

Marks and Houston (2002), p.321.

A further explanation for girls' higher staying-on rates in education after age 16 may be that on average they enjoy school more than boys and are more likely to accept educational values. The fact that girls do better than boys in school is well documented

(MacDonald, Saunders and Benefield 1999; Sukhnandan 1999; Arnot *et al.* 1998). However Keys and Fernandes (1993) review research showing that girls tend to hold more positive attitudes towards school than boys. Arnot *et al.* (1998) similarly review evidence suggesting that girls tend to enjoy both academic and non-academic aspects of school life more than boys, while Sukhnandan (1999) reviews evidence that boys tend to have less positive attitudes than girls towards schoolwork and homework. Along with MacDonald, Saunders and Benefield (1999), she cites studies indicating that boys and girls prefer different learning styles, with boys tending to favour more active learning. They appear in general to be less attentive in class and more reluctant to do extra work, often over-estimating their own ability. As a result, they are more likely to get into trouble over their behaviour. Overall, Sukhnandan concludes that:

'In general, there is an anti-intellectual, anti-educational and anti-learning culture among boys.'

Sukhnandan (1999), p.11.

Arnot, David and Weiner (1999) highlight the influence of concepts of masculinity on attitudes to school. They suggest that some versions of masculinity are incompatible with the new emphasis in schooling on competition and performance:

'Schoolwork and academic scholarship have been portrayed by some boys as feminized and in conflict with emergent masculinities'.

Arnot, David and Weiner (1999), p.155.

Some studies indicate that girls go about the process of choosing post-16 routes more efficiently than boys. Varlaam and Shaw (1984) report that girls who planned to stay on in full-time education after 16 were more likely than boys to know exactly how long they would stay and which courses they would take. Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996) found that girls were much more likely than boys to use their social networks to get information about alternative routes, and that this could be both useful and supportive.

Ethnic group

Young people from minority ethnic groups are much more likely than young white people to stay in full-time education after 16, and this is true of every minority ethnic group that can be distinguished in available statistics. Young people of Indian origin have particularly high levels of participation. The evidence comes from the 1991 Census of Population (Wrench and Hassan 1996; Leslie and Drinkwater 1999), from the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study (Payne 2001b) and from the annual Careers Activity Survey (Owen et al. 2000). These high staying on rates are found despite the fact that young people of Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Afro-Caribbean origin are, on average, less successful academically in school than whites (Gillborn and Gipps 1996; Payne 2001b). The differences with white staying on rates remain highly significant even after controlling for GCSE results and other relevant factors (Leslie and Drinkwater 1999; Payne 1998; Drew, Gray and Sime 1992). As with male-female differences, the high

staying on rates of members of minority ethnic groups are particularly marked for young people with poor GCSE results (Owen *et al.* 2000; Payne 2001b).

Hagell and Shaw (1996) argue that minority ethnic groups are pushed into staying on in education because they have a greater risk of unemployment than whites if they enter the labour market at 16, and Youth Cohort Study data confirm this (Payne 1998). However Wrench and Hassan (1996) argue that their high staying on rates are caused by both positive and negative factors:

'The positive factors are the above average ambitions and the high value placed on education among ethnic minority communities. The negative factors are the fear of unemployment and racial discrimination in the labour market.'

Wrench and Hassan (1996), p.1.

Leslie and Drinkwater's (1999) analysis of data from the 1991 Census of Population and the Labour Force Survey supports this account. They conclude that:

'Evidence has been found that economic factors are responsible for the higher participation of ethnic minorities in further education. These are a mixture of push (lower current opportunities) and pull (greater expected future benefits) factors, and they operate across all ethnic groups, including whites. Non-whites have a higher endowment of such push and pull factors, and this encourages some additional participation.'

Leslie and Drinkwater (1999), p.75

However Leslie and Drinkwater also found an 'additional ethnicity effect' in staying on rates which could not be explained by economic factors. This accords with a large body of research evidence indicating that many members of minority ethnic groups hold very positive attitudes towards education. For example, Mirza (1992) reports positive attitudes towards education in West Indian families, while Basit (1997) concludes from her research review that:

'...most ethnic minorities in Britain attach a great deal of importance to, and show a high degree of enthusiasm for, education. It is perceived as an asset and a medium for upward social mobility.'

Basit (1997), p.94.

The study by Eggleston, Dunn and Anjali (1986) of a racially mixed cohort of Year 11 students in four urban areas found that though fear of unemployment provided a strong motive for staying in education, Asian students firmly believed that education would enable them to get them a job. There was a very keen desire on the part of minority ethnic students to enter higher education. Penn and Scattergood's (1992) study of Year 11 pupils in three Rochdale schools also reports 'a very strong pre-disposition for Asian children to wish to remain within the educational system' (p. 84), including the wish to go on to university.

Several studies draw attention to the determination of many young people from minority ethnic groups to persevere with their education despite discouraging

examination results at age 16. They appear often willing to spend the first year of post-compulsory education re-sitting examinations in order to improve their grades and so enter A level courses or college (Basit 1997; Eggleston 1993; Drew, Gray and Sime 1992; Mirza 1992). Owen *et al.* (2000) report that young people of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin were more likely than other groups to be still at school or in a sixth form college in their third post-compulsory year. Determination in the face of discouragement was also revealed by the finding of one study that Afro-Caribbean students who got places at college had made more applications and received more rejections than white students (Eggleston, Dunn and Anjali 1986).

Both Penn and Scattergood (1992) and Lightbody *et al.* (1997) describe the high occupational aspirations held by young Asians, and Drew, Gray and Sime (1992) report the preference of Asians for A levels over vocational qualifications. Several authors report that Asian and Afro-Caribbean students are not interested in apprenticeships and have negative images of government-supported training for young people (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown 2001; Wrench and Hassan 1996; Eggleston 1993; Penn and Scattergood 1992). Mirza (1992) found that young black men neither expected nor aspired to skilled manual jobs, an area of the labour market from which in her view they had traditionally been excluded. She reports that managing agents in the then Youth Training Schemes who could offer the more desirable training positions in private industry tended to headhunt for mainly white recruits in largely white schools. Her position is supported by Owen *et al.* (2000), who present evidence that minority ethnic groups are heavily under-represented in the higher status work-based training programmes compared to their representation on lower status schemes.

A number of studies show that young women of minority ethnic origin have a strong commitment to education. Wrench and Hassan (1996) used the 1991 Census of population to show that young Afro-Caribbean women had a higher rate of participation in full-time education than either white women or Afro-Caribbean males. Mirza's (1992) in-depth study found that Afro-Caribbean girls had higher social class expectations than either their white or their male classmates. Basit (1997) found no evidence in her research review that that Muslim girls had any lower aspirations than other Asian girls. Her own ethnographic case study of Muslim girls concluded that it was a common misperception that Muslim girls were not allowed a career or education. Another qualitative study of young women of Pakistani origin cautions:

'...against stereotypical assumptions about Muslim families. While some remain opposed to women going out to work, others hold comparatively flexible attitudes on the issue, and yet others are positively in favour of women pursuing their own careers.'

Brah and Shaw (1992), p.49.

There is a very extensive literature giving evidence of both unintentional and overt racism on the part of schoolteachers in their attitudes towards and treatment of young people from minority ethnic groups. This is held to be a particular problem for Afro-Caribbean males, whom teachers tend to see as less able and more threatening than Asians (Gundara 2000; Sewell 1997; Gillborn and Gipps 1996; Wrench and Hassan 1996; Figueroa 1993; Eggleston 1993; Brah and Shaw 1992; Mirza 1992; Mac an Ghaill

1988; Wright 1986). In the judgement of a number of these authors, this racism promotes the emergence of anti-school subcultures (Sewell 1997; Mac an Ghaill 1988; Wright 1986). As one commentator puts it:

> *'Black adolescents often demonstrate the self-fulfilling prophecy by reacting with manners, speech and behaviour that appear to justify the differential in expectations that surrounds them.'*
>
> Eggleston (1993), p.234.

The wish to get out of school also appears to be a factor in the tendency of Afro-Caribbeans to prefer to continue their education in college rather than school (Owen *et al.* 2000; Eggleston *et al.* 1986).

6 INFLUENCES FROM OUTSIDE THE FAMILY

Careers education and guidance

The evidence suggests that the formal careers education and guidance offered by professional careers teachers in schools and careers advisers outside of school, though helpful to a number of young people, is not generally as strong an influence on choice at 16 as family. Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996) conclude from their qualitative study that:

'For most students, friends and family have a much higher profile and a more decisive role than formal advisers'.

Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996), p.39.

Similarly, a large national sample of students in their last compulsory year on average rated parents as a more helpful source of careers advice and guidance than either school careers teachers or careers advisers (Connor *et al.* 1999). An analysis of the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study by Witherspoon (1995) showed that although advice to stay on from careers teachers or careers advisers was associated with a higher probability of actually staying on, even after taking account of GCSE results and other confounding factors, advice from parents had a more important effect. According to Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996):

'Careers advisers' major function for many students is as catalysts. It is often not what they say, not any specific advice or information they give, but the sense of urgency or necessity that they instil into the students.'

Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996), p.39.

There is reasonably firm evidence that good quality careers education and guidance can increase young people's careers-related skills. One very large study found that enhanced provision in Years 9 and 10 was associated with improvements in young people's opportunity awareness, research skills and levels of confidence in transition skills (Morris, Lines and Golden 1998). Kidd and Wardman (1999) review a wide range of research on the effectiveness of careers education and guidance, concluding that:

'Substantial evidence exists from US and UK research to show that career education and guidance ... affects decision-making skills, self awareness, opportunity awareness, certainty of decision-making and decisiveness.'

Kidd and Wardman (1999), p.261.

However, it is very hard to establish whether these improved skills in turn make any difference to the choices that young people make at age 16 and to the consequences of their choices, as measured by the risk of dropping out of the chosen pathway or success rates in achieving goals. While careers-related skills can be measured by formal testing in the classroom, post-16 routes are subject to a wide range of influences amongst

which it is very hard to disentangle the separate effect of careers education and guidance. Three obstacles in particular impede effective research: the ethical unacceptability of experimental research designs, reliance on the young person's recall for information about the careers education and guidance that they have received, and high rates of sample attrition when trying to track young people over the years following the end of compulsory education. Thus attempts to collect evidence of the effectiveness of careers guidance often rely simply on young people's reports of their experiences, as in Kidd and Wardman's (1999) study of the potential role of careers guidance in reducing course switching or drop-out.

One recent attempt to get direct evidence of the impact of careers education and guidance by tracking Year 11 students in the East Midlands over the following two years faced severe problems of sample attrition (Stuart, Tyers and Crowder 2000). This study concluded that although young people who had received high quality careers education and guidance in Year 11 had more positive perceptions of the transition process at age 16, there appeared to be no significant impact on drop-out or on the acquisition of qualifications over the following two years. Witherspoon's (1995) analysis of the Youth Cohort Study produced slightly more positive results. She found some evidence that careers education and guidance was associated with a small reduction in the chances of being unemployed, net of GCSE results, sex, ethnicity, truancy and attitudes. The effect was only found in the first year after the end of compulsory education and did not persist in subsequent years.

Careers professionals probably have more influence on some areas of choice at 16 than others. White *at al.* (1996) suggest that advice from careers professionals can influence choice of course, and Witherspoon (1995) found that, amongst young people who stayed in full-time education, those who said that they had help from careers professionals were more likely than others to be doing vocational courses. She also found that Careers Officers were particularly helpful in arranging interviews for jobs or for government-supported training, and that Careers Officers were cited most frequently as a source of help by those with average GCSE results. Stuart, Tyers and Crowder (2000) suggest that careers education and guidance is not an important influence on A level students, but may be important for others.

The impact of careers education and guidance on young people's choices at 16 is also affected by the variability of provision. Provision in schools appears to be particularly uneven, and young people tend to name careers advisers from services outside the school as being more helpful than careers teachers in school (Furlong 1993; Taylor 1992; Maychell and Evans 1998). Taylor (1992) found striking differences in careers education between the Surrey schools that he studied, with considerable variation in both the nature of the provision and the amount of time devoted to it. No careers teacher was employed exclusively to teach careers, and in some schools, careers education was given by form tutors. An in-depth study of careers teachers in 12 comprehensive schools in the West Midlands found that very few had any specialist training in careers education (Harris 1992).

Mirza (1992) suggest that young people from minority ethnic groups may be more in need of formal careers education and guidance than whites because their families and social contacts often hold weaker positions in the labour market. However she also found, along with Brah and Shaw (1992) and Basit (1997), that they tend to find the services on offer unhelpful. Both Mirza and Basit claim that formal careers education and guidance may attempt to depress the aspirations of young people from minority ethnic groups. Duncan (1993) alleges that negative racial stereotypes undermine the value of the careers education and guidance given to Afro-Caribbean pupils:

'Careers teachers and advisers must be aware of the debilitating dangers of low expectations, negative preconceptions and stereotypes as and when they advise black children.'

Duncan (1993), p.236.

There is also concern that careers education and guidance may be offered too late. Taylor (1992) reported that among the Year 11 students whom he studied in Surrey:

'...the single most common concern appeared to be the timing of information and advice; there was often a perceived need for advice to be given earlier and on an individual basis.'

Taylor (1992), p.319

Hemsley-Brown (1999) also concluded from her qualitative study of decision-making that careers education and guidance should be given before age 14.

The launch of the Connexions Service has brought substantial changes to careers guidance services for young people. There is evidence that Connexions has the potential to improve the effectiveness of careers guidance, and that young people who are allocated a personal adviser are very satisfied with the service (Shiles 2002). However, as yet no direct research has been carried out to test whether Connexions makes a difference to the choices that young people make about post-16 routes.

Other teachers

A proportion of young people receive some help and advice about careers from teachers who are not careers specialists. In Maychell and Evans' national sample of Year 11 pupils, nearly as many had talked to a subject teacher about their careers plans as had talked to a careers teacher, though very few listed a subject teacher amongst their most helpful sources of information and guidance. According to Macrae, Maguire and Ball's (1996) qualitative study:

'Teachers hover rather hazily in the background, occasionally having something useful or supportive to say, but for the most part they provide a general sense of "what's out there" and places to look and find out more.'

Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996), p.39.

It seems nevertheless that a few individual teachers can be influential. Taylor (1992) reports that:

'Young people sought out information and advice from staff who were perceived to be approachable, accessible and supportive, irrespective of whether they had specific responsibility for careers education and guidance.'

Taylor (1992), p.315.

Similarly, Mangan, Adnett and Davies (2000) found that a fifth of the Year 11 pupils in their sample who were intending to stay in the sixth form of their present school rather than to move to college had been influenced to do so by one of their teachers.

When teachers do give out advice, on the majority of occasions it is to encourage their students to stay in full-time education. The Tower Hamlets survey found that 13% of Year 11 pupils intending to stay in education gave as one of their reasons, 'Teachers encouraged me to carry on studying', and 53% said that teachers had actually advised them to stay. In contrast, only 4% of those intending to leave gave as one of their reasons, 'Teachers advised me to leave', and 11% said that teachers had actually advised them to leave. However very few said that teacher advice would make them change their mind, either to stay or to leave (Kysel, West and Scott 1992). Similarly, Maychell and Evans (1998) found that Year 11 pupils who were intending to stay on were more likely than intending leavers both to talk to subject teachers about their careers plans and to find these teachers a helpful source of information and guidance.

The school

Further influence on young people's choice of route at 16 comes from the school that they attend. It is well established that, after controlling for GCSE results, parental occupation and other relevant factors, there remain substantial differences between individual schools in the proportion of students who continue in full-time education after 16 (Cheng 1995; Paterson and Raffe 1995, Ferguson and Unwin 1996).

Although there is a large literature on the characteristics that make a school effective in terms of raising pupil attainment, there has been relatively little work on the aspects of the school environment that encourage staying on rates above the level that pupil attainment and other pupil characteristics would predict. At present the causes of the differences between schools in staying on rates remain largely obscure, research being hampered by the lack of comparative data on schools other than simple administrative and statistical measures. Cheng (1995) matched the limited data then available on schools to individual level data from the Youth Cohort Study. She found that, after controlling for student characteristics including GCSE results, staying on rates tended to be higher in voluntary aided schools than in schools maintained by the Local Education Authority. High teacher turnover and a high proportion of pupils receiving free school meals were associated with a marginally significant reduction in staying on rates. However no difference was found between single-sex and co-educational schools, and the pupil-teacher ratio and the length of experience of the teaching staff also had no effect.

Nevertheless it seems likely that schools do influence pupils' attitudes to education, which in turn influence their choices at age 16. Differences are already apparent at junior level: Mortimore *et al.* (1988) found significant variation between junior schools in pupils' attitudes to school, net of background factors. Hagell and Shaw's (1996) study of 34 inner-city secondary schools reported strong differences between schools in pupil attitudes, though the schools where attitudes were the most positive had no obvious similarities. Similarly, Keys and Fernandes (1993) found that young people's attitudes to school showed very little association with a range of school characteristics, including the nature of the catchment area, the type of school, the percentage of pupils receiving free school meals, the proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups, the reading age of the intake and GCSE results.

The concept of a school 'ethos', 'climate' or 'culture' has been used to describe how schools influence their pupils. This concept was given prominence by a seminal study using rigorous research methods, which argued that schools have a particular set of values, attitudes and behaviours which becomes characteristic of the school as a whole (Rutter *et al.* 1979). The authors concluded that:

'...to an appreciable extent, children's behaviour and attitudes are shaped and influenced by their experiences at school and, in particular, by the qualities of the school as a social institution.'

Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore and Ouston (1979), p. 179.

However, it can be hard to pin down what exactly is meant by 'ethos'. Lauder, Jamieson and Wikely (1998) attack the concept as used in educational research, saying that there is no theoretical basis to the ways in which it is operationalised:

'...it is merely defined according to an arbitrary set of questionnaire items which has differed from one study to another... Ethos may be a fruitful idea, but in research terms it remains suspended in the ether.'

Lauder, Jamieson and Wikely (1998), p.55.

According to Smyth and Hattam (2002):

'School culture is still one of the most elusive, difficult and complex notions in the educational literature.'

Smyth and Hattam (2002), p.377.

One difference between schools that affects choices at 16 in a way more easily understood than school ethos is whether there is a sixth form. Analysis of the Youth Cohort Study shows that, after controlling for a wide range of student characteristics including GCSE results, young people are more likely to stay in full-time education after age 16 if they spent Year 11 in a school with a sixth form (Payne 1998). The same result was obtained by Connor *et al.* (1999) from their large national study of the intentions of students in the last year of compulsory education. An obvious reason for this effect is that in order to continue their education, students in schools without a sixth form must

transfer to another institution - in schools with a sixth form, staying on entails no upheaval and a degree of inertia keeps some in education. In addition, competition between institutions for students mean that schools with sixth forms tend to encourage students to stay in school, whereas these pressures are not present in schools without sixth forms (Foskett and Hesketh 1997). Thus Taylor (1992) found that in the Surrey schools that he studied, it was schools without sixth forms that taught their students about the widest range of options at 16.

Friends and classmates

There is some evidence of a tendency for young people to be more likely to decide to stay in education after age 16 if their schoolmates also stay on. Thomas, Webber and Walton (2002) analysed the 1998 sweep of the Bradford Youth Cohort Study, which covered over 2,000 young people from 32 schools. They found that, after taking account of individual characteristics, boys' intentions about staying on were significantly correlated with the proportion of the other students in their year group who intended to stay. There was, however, little evidence of a similar association for girls. Similarly, Cheng (1995) found that in schools with sixth forms, the proportion of students who had stayed on in previous years was an important predictor of the choices of the current generation of Year 11 students. These effects could be due to the direct influence of friends and classmates on young people's choices, to other unmeasured school characteristics that make staying on more or less attractive in a particular school, or to both in combination.

The literature suggests that most young people are not unduly swayed in the short term by what their friends choose to do, but that over a longer period of time friends may help to form their general attitudes towards education. In Ryrie's words,

'...probably the influence of friends took place, not so much in a direct way as by making a contribution to the students' sense of what it would be natural or appropriate for them to do.'

Ryrie (1981) p.62

There is no doubt that young people discuss their plans for the future with their friends. In a national sample of Year 9 pupils, about three quarters did so 'often' or 'sometimes' (Keys and Fernandes 1993), and in a national sample of young people in Year 11, over half said that they talked to their friends about their career plans (Maychell and Evans 1998). According to Mangan, Adnett and Davies (2000), friends, along with brothers and sisters, were a useful source of information for Year 11 students trying to decide whether to stay in their school sixth form or move to college. Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996) also found that friends and siblings played a role in shaping how they felt about different options:

'There is a very strong polarisation between "cold", abstract, formal information and 'hot', experiential, direct knowledge... Students are sceptical about "cold" information ... it cannot tell them what it is like to "be there".'

Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996)

Taylor agrees that friends can be a useful source of information on specific options:

'Friends could also be helpful ... especially for information on particular occupational experience, college reputations and course provision... For some, friends were a significant influence on post-16 choices, though there was little, if any, impression that they had undue influence.'

Taylor (1992), p.319

However relative few young people appear to opt for a particular pathway primarily because their friends are choosing that route. For example, in Vincent and Dean's (1977) large sample of post-16 students, none gave, 'Most of my friends stayed on' as their main reason for continuing in full-time education after age 16. In the Tower Hamlets survey of Year 11 students, only 8% of intending leavers gave 'Many of my friends are leaving' as a reason for leaving, and only 3% of intending stayers gave 'None of my friends are leaving' as a reason for staying (Kysel, West and Scott 1992). In national sample of Year 11 pupils, a third said that school friends had some influence on their choice of route, but only 1% said friends were the single most important influence (Foskett and Hesketh 1997). In another national sample, fewer than one in twenty Year 11 students named their friends amongst their three most helpful sources of careers advice and guidance (Maychell and Evans 1998).

Labour market effects

The proportion of young people who stay on in education after 16 varies substantially between regions and between travel-to-work areas. Geographical differences in participation rates remain significant even after differences in young people's GCSE results, personal characteristics and family background have been taken into account (Gray, Jesson and Tranmer 1994; Cheng 1995; Payne 1998). The differences can be large: Youth Cohort Study data show that in the middle third of the national distribution of GCSE results there was a gap of around 17 percentage points between the region with the highest and the region with the lowest participation rate, while in the bottom third of GCSE results the corresponding gap was around 21 percentage points (Payne 2001b).

A number of commentators interpret geographical differences in staying on rates as a response by young people, at least in part, to the opportunities that they see in their local labour market. As Hannan *et al.* (1995) put it:

'A purely economic view would stress individual choice, and see investment in education as a function of probable returns from the labour market. In our view, however, such apparently individual choices are themselves made in the context of a certain type of labour market, which provides various signals and rewards.'

Hannan, Hovels, Van den Berg and White (1995), pp.334-335.

However the precise nature of the relationship between local labour market conditions and young people's choices at age 16 is complex. In the 1980s the Scottish

School Leaver Surveys indicated a 'discouraged worker' effect, whereby, after controlling for confounding factors, young people were more likely to stay on in areas of high unemployment. These findings were not replicated in England and Wales, and in Scotland the association had disappeared by 1991 (Raffe and Willms 1989; Gray, Jesson and Tranmer 1994; Paterson and Raffe 1995). An influential study of the labour market experiences of a large sample of 18-24 year olds in Leicester, St Albans, Stafford and Sunderland linked attitudes to school and views on the value of education to the strength of demand in the local area for jobs requiring qualifications (Ashton, Maguire and Spilsbury 1988). This interpretation was supported by an analysis of Youth Cohort Study data, which found that, after controlling for a range of factors, staying on rates were higher in areas where a relatively large proportion of the workforce was employed in SIC Division 8 (banking, finance etc.) or SIC Division 9 (other services) (Cheng 1995). Looking in more detail at variations between schools within a single shire county, Ferguson and Unwin (1996) found that the buoyancy of the local youth labour market was an important factor in explaining differences in the proportion of young people leaving at 16 to begin work or training, but they also found great diversity between schools in the proportion leaving to become unemployed.

The evidence therefore indicates that young people's choices at 16 are shaped partly by the opportunities that they see in the local labour market, including both the industrial structure and the level of demand for labour. However these labour market factors do not operate in a mechanical fashion. Cregan (2001), who reviewed a number of studies of the relationship between the local labour market and participation in post-compulsory education, asserts that the findings:

'...demonstrate the importance of local labour markets, not via a crude measure of unemployment, but through their differing effects on young people's expectations mediated by socio-economic influences.'

Cregan (2001), p.133.

Her view is supported by an in-depth study of secondary school students in four contrasting Scottish local labour markets, which found that young people responded differently to restricted opportunities within their own local labour market. Those who left school at the minimum age tended to be more optimistic about local job opportunities than those who remained. Some of those who stayed on did so some simply because they believed that there was no work available, whilst others stayed because the lack of opportunity locally gave them an incentive to improve their qualifications (Biggart and Furlong 1996). Growing up in a deprived neighbourhood had a particularly negative effect on educational aspirations. The authors conclude that:

'Young people learn about the world of work within a family and peer environment, and labour market effects are mediated within a family and neighbourhood context.'

Biggart and Furlong (1996), p.254.

In addition to the level and nature of the demand for youth labour in the local labour market, wage structures also appear influence young people's choices at 16.

Hannan *et al.* (1995) show that the wages paid to unqualified school leavers in Britain (based on 1987 data) are comparatively high, and that young people with a basic level of educational qualification receive no wage premium over those who are wholly unqualified. This, they argue, has encouraged young people to leave school rather than to stay in education to try to improve their qualifications, despite the fact that young people with no qualifications at all have a significantly greater risk of unemployment later on than young people who hold a basic level of qualification.

7 SPECIFIC CHOICES

Choices within full-time education

Specific choices about which courses to take and where to take them seem usually to be taken later than the choice about whether or not to stay on in full-time education. Half of Foskett and Hesketh's (1997) national sample of Year 11 pupils, surveyed towards the end of the school year, said that the had 'just recently' started to think about their post-16 options. In a further account of results from this project, they report that although 95% had made a choice about their next step, in most cases this choice was provisional, depending on the outcome of examination results (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown 2001). Taylor (1992) also found that some young people who were intending to stay in full-time education after 16 were postponing their choice of course or the choice between school sixth form and college until they got their examination results.

It is possible that parents allow their children more scope over these choices than they do over the decision about staying in education, and that friends have a little more influence here. For example, Foskett and Hesketh (1997) report that 7% of Year 11 pupils said that friends were the single most important influence on their choice of post-16 institution, compared to only 1% who said that friends were the single most important influence on their choice of broad post-16 route. In another sample of over 1,000 GNVQ students, 12% said that one of the reasons why they chose to do GNVQs rather than A levels was that their friends were doing the course (Fitz-Gibbon 1997).

School or college?

School sixth forms, further education (FE) colleges and sixth form colleges tend to specialise in different types of courses, and this obviously affects young people's choice between them. Youth Cohort Study data show that the profile of courses taken by students in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges is largely similar, though sixth form colleges have rather more students doing GCSE re-sits. Both school sixth forms and sixth form colleges have many more A level students than FE colleges - around three quarters of students in Year 12, compared to around a fifth of Year 12 students in FE colleges. FE colleges in turn have a much higher proportion of vocational students (Payne 2001b).

Given the concentration of students on vocational courses in FE colleges, it is not surprising that 16/17 year olds in FE colleges have on average significantly poorer results in GCSE examinations that students in school sixth forms or sixth form colleges. However school sixth forms and sixth form colleges tend to retain students with good GCSE results, even after controlling for course type: Year 12 A level students in school sixth forms and sixth form colleges have significantly better GCSE results than their

counterparts in FE colleges, and similarly for students on vocational courses (Payne 2001b).

For Year 11 students in schools without a sixth form, moving to a sixth form college or FE college is often the only option for continuing their full-time education. The Youth Cohort Study shows that FE colleges draw half or more of their intake at age 16/17 from schools without sixth forms. In comprehensive schools with sixth forms, between three fifths and two thirds of Year 11 pupils who stay in full-time education after 16 go on to the sixth form of their own school, and in selective and independent schools the proportion is well over four fifths (Payne 2001b).

There is a competitive market for students between school sixth forms and colleges, and there is evidence that schools encourage Year 11 students to stay on in their own sixth form. Taylor's (1992) Surrey study found that schools with no sixth form offered wide ranging careers education in Year 11 that included vocational options, but schools with sixth forms gave a high priority to staying in school and to post-18 career routes. They gave little information about FE colleges; according to one student, 'They just push you into the sixth form' (p.315). Young people often said that they needed:

'...more information about the full range of college courses available, as well as the practicalities of applying to and studying at college.'

Taylor (1992), p.319.

Taylor also felt that some students stayed in the same school 'out of habit or ease' (p.327), on occasions being prepared to compromise on their choice of course in order to do so. Mangan, Adnett and Davies (2000) draw attention to the fact that for those whose school has a sixth form, moving to another school or college after 16 involves 'significant transaction costs, largely associated with the costs of search and switching' (p.3). These costs are 'largely associated with the need to develop new social relationships and behaviour patterns' (p.4) and they produce a degree of inertia amongst students.

However, approximately a third of Year 11 students in comprehensive schools with sixth forms do move to college to continue their studies. Their choice appears to be based on pragmatism, particularly course availability and closeness to home, together with the wish to get away from school. As Mangan, Adnett and Davies (2000) point out, switching costs are lower 'for those alienated in their existing institution' (p.4). In Vincent and Dean's (1977) large sample of students on post-16 courses, amongst those who moved to college from schools with sixth forms,

'*...rather more than half... moved for curricular reasons, and most of the remainder through what might loosely be termed "disaffection with school".'*

Vincent and Dean (1977), p.62.

According to Foskett and Hesketh (1997), the top four factors affecting Year 11 students' choice of post-16 institution were its academic reputation, their wish to stay in their current school, the fact that the chosen institution was the only one offering the course they wanted, and geographical proximity. Keys and Maychell (1998) found that the

reason most often given for moving to FE college was, 'It offered the course I wanted to do'. Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) conducted semi-structured interviews with 79 Year 11 pupils who had already decided to continue their post-16 education in college rather than their school sixth form. In choosing to move to college, 'the young people had concentrated on subject and course choices' (p.19). Mangan, Adnett and Davies (2000) in their survey of Year 11 students in nine schools with sixth forms found that more than two fifths of those planning to do vocational courses and intermediate level GNVQs planned to move to college, compared to just a tenth of those doing A levels and a third of those doing advanced GNVQs. They found that the curriculum on offer ranked highest amongst the factors that young people took into account in choosing where to study, with examination results, facilities, discipline and travel also important. Legard, Woodfield and White (2001) report that college choice was influenced by accessibility and location, especially in rural areas and on the outskirts of urban areas, by course availability, and by the image of the institution. College was seen as a less restrictive environment than school, but also as less likely to push students to get good grades.

Young people often regard college as a more adult environment than school. Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997) found that young people who had chosen college assumed in general:

'...that further education was going to be less "formal" and a more "adult" environment, and many looked forward to that.'

Bloomer and Hodkinson (1997), p.15.

Similarly Keys and Maychell (1998) found that more than half of Year 12 students in colleges agreed that 'I felt there would be a more adult atmosphere at college'. Mangan, Adnett and Davies (2000) point to the attractions of freedom and independence and the absence of school uniforms; they also suggest that for some students, the opportunity to start afresh is attractive. By moving, young people can put unhappy relationships with teachers behind them, and the value of this is indicated by the fact that sixth form colleges have a significantly higher success rate in GCSE re-sits than school sixth forms (Payne 2001a). There is also evidence that FE colleges are more likely than school sixth forms to be chosen by young people who are not wholly committed to staying in full-time education. Keys and Maychell (1998) report that, after allowing for differences in sex, parental occupation and academic attainment, students in school sixth forms were more likely than students in FE colleges to say that they did not even consider leaving full-time education. When Kysel, West and Scott (1992) asked young people who intended to leave full-time education at 16 what alternatives they would consider if they could not find a job, they found that significantly more named going to college than mentioned returning to school.

Hemsley-Brown (1999) applies the model of pragmatic rationality to the choice of post-16 institution. Using evidence from her in-depth longitudinal study of decision-making processes, she reports that although students gave objective practical criteria for choosing one college rather than another, their actual decisions were often not in accordance with these criteria. She argues that the choice process could not be separated from family background, culture and life history, and that in-depth interviewing revealed:

'...underlying motives for their choice based on, for example, the social class or visual appearance of students attending the colleges - preserving or enhancing "self-image" was an important factor. These reasons were implicit rather than explicit and emerged after prolonged association with students...'

Hemsley-Brown (1999), p.86.

Similarly, Macrae, Maguire and Ball (1996) found that although course availability and travel were often cited as reasons for choices, the student's subjective response to the college was also very important. Students were concerned about whether the college was friendly, what the work ethic was like, whether the staff was supportive and what the buildings were like.

Foskett and Hesketh (1997) highlight the role of students as consumers in the educational marketplace, finding 'evidence of a growing consumerist approach to post-16 education by the contemporary school leaver' (p.308). Competition for students between post-16 institutions is particularly intense where there is 'a multiplicity of providers serving a largely indigenous population' (p.314), and young people's choices are influenced by college marketing strategies. Mangan, Adnett and Davies (2000) and Legard, Woodfield and White (2001) also draw attention to the active role played by schools and colleges in trying to attract students, and to the influence of the college prospectus, visits to colleges, parents evenings in schools, open days in college, and other special events.

Course choice

Course choice in Year 12 is strongly influenced by GCSE results, and students who opt for A levels have on average substantially better results in GCSEs than students who choose vocational courses. This pattern is of course partly determined by entry requirements for A level courses, but A levels remain the choice of the very large majority of students with good GCSE results in preference to Advanced GNVQs, which were intended to have parity of esteem with A levels, and over other Level 3 vocational courses (Payne 2001b).

The choice between A levels and vocational courses is also influenced by demographic factors. Connor *et al.* (1999) report that female students are more likely than male students to opt for vocational courses, and Payne's (2001b) analysis of Youth Cohort Study data shows that this gender difference remains after controlling for GCSE results,. The same analysis also found that, after controlling for GCSE results, students from minority ethnic groups were more likely than white students to take A levels - a finding that accords with ethnographic studies that describe the high value placed by minority ethnic groups on academic education. The analysis also showed that students whose parents had partly skilled or unskilled occupations were more likely to choose vocational courses than students with parents in higher level occupations.

Students on Level 3 vocational courses offer a variety of reasons for choosing the vocational route rather than A levels, including their interest in the topic, a preference for assessed coursework over examinations, and a more varied, flexible and independent way of working (Fitz-Gibbon 1997; White *et al.* 1996; Helsby, Knight and Saunders 1998; Legard, Woodfield and White 2001). However Wolf argues that, in reality, young people who take these qualifications do not choose to take them because they want a vocational option; on the contrary, GNVQs have become 'a general education award for the middle achievement level of 16-19 year olds' (Wolf 1997, p.55). The tri-partite structure in education and training at age 16 to 19 - the 'three pathways' of academic A levels, broad vocational GNVQs and occupationally specific NVQs - is, she argues, a governmental response to the pressures in the education system that arise from the growth in demand for higher education:

'One of the reasons for tripartite structures… is to provide for this troublesome 'middle group': those who have not (and in many cases should not have) accepted that they have reached the terminal stage of their education but who are not absolutely clear candidates for successful selection onto the next rung or step of the pyramid.'

Wolf (1997), p.46

Her evidence for this argument lies firstly in the close association between GCSE results and course choice, described above. Support also comes from the fact that a large proportion of Level 3 vocational students say that they want to enter higher education and relatively few expect to go on to vocational training. According to Wolf's analysis, more than half at any one time are thinking of higher education. Fitz-Gibbon's (1997) large sample of GNVQ students confirms this: for example, 52% of Business GNVQ students said it was fairly or most likely that they would go to university, as did further substantial proportions across a range of GNVQ courses.

Wolf's view is supported by Helsby, Knight and Saunders (1998), who held discussions with staff and students in twelve schools and colleges in North West England. They argue that, despite the rhetoric of tri-partism, hierarchical notions of ability still hold sway and 'there was very little faith in the existence of parity of esteem between A levels and Advanced GNVQs' (p.69). Similarly Legard, Woodfield and White's (2001) qualitative study concluded that:

'The prevailing view among young people, teachers and parents was that A levels were the best qualifications to obtain in order to compete for a well-paid, interesting job or to continue into higher education'

Legard, Woodfield and White (2001), p.17.

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) offer further evidence of the low status of vocational courses in full-time education:

'Almost two thirds of those opting to stay in full-time education/training post-16 express a preference for an academic programme rather than a vocational programme. Participation in A level courses is, though, eventually less than 40% of the age cohort,

which suggests that a significant number of young people are selecting vocational routes as a second best option at the final point of post-16 choice'.

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001), p.102.

Unwin and Wellington (2001) also argue that GNVQs are chosen largely by young people who are unlikely to succeed at A-level. However their synthesis of research findings from three projects with young people also leads them to the view that for some students, GNVQs are a second-best to work-based training:

'GNVQs have proved to be very popular with 16 year olds who do not wish to enter the labour market or seek a training place and who may not feel…academically able enough to cope with A-levels. They may also be taken up by young people who cannot find a suitable Modern Apprenticeship… due to local labour market conditions… Where labour market conditions are favourable, GNVQs will be less attractive to young people than the work-based route.'

Unwin and Wellington (2001), p.44

Work-based training

Before the rapid rise in staying on rates, around a third of 16 year olds left school to start work-based training. By the mid-1990s, this proportion had fallen to about one in eight, the large majority of whom were on government-supported schemes (Payne 1998). It is not surprising, therefore, that Taylor's (1992) Surrey study found that most young people took it for granted that staying in full-time education was the best thing to do, and preferred general education to vocational training.

The extent to which Year 11 students make a positive choice in favour of work-based training remains rather unclear, and the present review found comparatively little research on this topic. The issue is confused by the role of government-supported training as both a provider of high quality training and a safety-net for those who are unable get jobs. Taylor (1992) added to a long string of evidence on the unpopularity of government schemes for young people when he reported that:

'Young people's reactions to Youth Training as a post-16 destination were frequently negative - despite the fact that half had favourable attitudes to vocational training.'

Taylor (1992), p.323.

According to Taylor, they had 'negative perceptions of low status and poor pay', and knew little about the range of opportunities that Youth Training offered (p.321). He adds, however, that apprenticeships were seen as a more desirable option than Youth Training. Biggart's (2002) analysis of the Scottish School Leavers' Surveys showed that, in the three years following leaving school, low-attaining males had a tendency to move out of training into full-time work, and the author interpreted this as meaning that they preferred employment to training.

Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) have to a certain extent overcome the negative image associated with earlier government-supported youth training schemes. Nevertheless Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) found that Year 11 students gave a number of reasons for not choosing an MA. They believed that the qualifications it led to were not high enough for their career needs; that the apprenticeship route was not available for their chosen career; that the vocational route was too narrow; that vocational qualifications had little market value; and that they could get vocational qualifications more quickly full-time at college than through an MA. Overall, the authors considered that work-based training was a 'second tier' choice:

'Those who expressed a wish to take an employment with training route were usually those with the lowest qualification aspirations, or were choosing MAs as a result of a negative decision (i.e. not to stay at school) and a decision to earn money while training.'

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001), pp.131-132.

In contrast to this negative picture, Payne (2000) found that the large majority of young people who had left school to enter work-based training rated 'learning a skill' and 'being trained to do a job' as very important factors in their choice of route, and that these factors ranked slightly higher than 'finding a secure job' or 'earning money'. Apprentices were particularly likely to say that they had been swayed by the wish to learn a skill or to get training, and the large majority of this group agreed that they had got the place in education, work or training that they wanted. Moreover, although apprentices often had poorer GCSE results than young people who stayed in full-time education, they had on average better grades than 16 year old leavers who took full-time jobs without training (Payne 1998). The work of Legard, Woodfield and White (2001) supports the view that work-based training, especially on high-quality programmes, is a positive choice for many school leavers, though the authors still present it as a choice that is secondary to the primary decision about whether to stay in full-time education. They found that young people with specific career aims:

'...were often aware of the value of training and/or qualifications if they wanted to do well in their chosen area of employment. The possibility of being trained and assessed in the workplace was therefore an attractive alternative where they had firmly discounted the option of continuing in education.'

Legard, Woodfield and White (2001), p.14.

Unwin and Wellington (2001) similarly report that young people who chose MAs were attracted by the chance to gain work experience and qualifications at the same time:

'This desire for a combination of gaining qualifications and practical experience was repeated again and again in our conversations with apprentices.'

Unwin and Wellington (2001), p.38

There is some evidence that schools do not particularly encourage young people to undertake work-based training. In a sample of four inner-London secondary schools, only half of Year 11 pupils had heard of MAs, and those who had heard of them tended to

rank them well below GCSEs and Advanced GNVQs (Pitcher and Green 1999). Maychell and Evans (1998) report that nearly three in five of intending school leavers in their sample of Year 11 pupils said that they would like to have more information on different kinds of jobs and on combining work with training. Foskett and Hemsley-Brown's (2201) qualitative and quantitative studies also revealed that young people had limited knowledge of MAs, and well over half of Year 11 pupils had never heard of them. They report that schools tended to encourage young people to stay in full-time education, and to view those leaving for MAs as drop-outs. They also found great variation between schools in the knowledge that careers teachers had about work-based training. Taylor (1992) similarly found that young people leaving school were often vague about the possibilities open to them for work-based training:

'Few young people intending to enter the labour market [at age 16] appeared to have long-term prospects in view. They were often vague about the kinds of courses they might take to fit in with their vocationally oriented training and about the nature of the training and the qualifications to which it would lead.'

Taylor (1992), p.328

As we saw earlier, in a competitive marketplace for post-16 students, schools are more likely to try to persuade 16 year olds to stay on in their own sixth forms than to direct them towards work-based training.

Given this apparent lack of encouragement from schools, it comes as no surprise that Unwin and Wellington's (2001) study of young people doing MAs found that 'parents, especially fathers, had the most positive influence on the decision to do an apprenticeship' (p.33). These authors remark on a 'gentle pressure' from parents towards an apprenticeship: fathers who had been apprentices in manufacturing tended to be encouraging, as were mothers who had worked in information technology and retail trades. This view accords with that of Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001):

'The traditional view of training through apprenticeship as a pathway for white, working-class young men appears ... to be replicated in the uptake and interest in MAs'.

Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001), p.129.

8 IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Introduction

Young people are as diverse as the adult population. They come from widely varying backgrounds, attend very different types of school and differ hugely in personality, attitudes, interests and abilities. The attempt this report has made to describe how at age 16 they choose their pathways through education, training and work is in fact a series of generalisations that does not pretend to take account of the importance of individual experiences. However policy is normally based on generalisations, however inadequate, and not on individual cases. We need therefore to ensure that the evidence for these generalisations is as secure as possible.

Young people's choices at age 16 are affected by very many different factors. Accordingly, the present review has spanned a very wide range of topics, almost every one of which is the focus of a lively policy debate. It would be impossible for this review to highlight the policy issues that arise in all the areas that the review has covered. For this reason, this final chapter confines itself to implications for research that have emerged. It begins with some comments about the adequacy of the research data base on which our understanding of young people's choices is based, and goes on to identify certain specific issues that need more attention.

Adequacy of the research data base

Despite a very large volume of research literature, the evidence base underpinning our understanding of how young people make their choices at 16 is fairly thin. Several particular weaknesses are apparent: the scarcity of quantitative longitudinal studies with an educational perspective that follow young people through the secondary school years and beyond, the limitations of many large cross-sectional surveys, the need to test the generality of findings based on very small and very local qualitative studies, and the lack of quantitative data on young people from minority ethnic groups.

Longitudinal studies using quantitative methods are very expensive. To be done well, they require a budget that is committed to the project for the duration of the study, so that planning can be long-term. Unfortunately, the structure of funding for educational research in the UK means that this requirement is rarely met, and there is at present no national longitudinal data set focussing on educational issues that tracks young people through the secondary school years. As a result we have little systematic information on when choices about post-16 pathways are made, how those choices change as pupils progress through school, and how they are influenced by earlier educational decisions and by other factors. This situation may in due course be remedied by the DfES's proposed national longitudinal study of young people, currently in its design and pilot stages. This survey is planned to follow a large national sample of 13/14 year olds through to at least

age 19, and possibly beyond, using personal interviews with respondents and their parents and collating additional information from other sources. Further gains in the quality of longitudinal information available to researchers should come from improvements in administrative data. In particular, the introduction of individual pupil identifiers will allow young people's education and training between 16 and 18 to be linked to their earlier results in standardised attainment tests, their qualifications, and other data about their school careers. Both these developments should greatly enhance our understanding of choice at 16.

There have been several large-scale cross-sectional surveys of secondary school pupils over the last decade. However, for reasons of cost, most have used self-completion questionnaires administered to groups of young people in the classroom. This method of data collection tends to produce poorer quality data than can be obtained by personal interviews using trained interviewers, who can clarify what questions mean, ensure that none are omitted, probe replies, and prevent collusion between respondents. In self-completion surveys, questionnaire design and question wording have to be kept very simple, limiting the topics that can be covered. These surveys have also usually excluded pupils who were absent from school on the day of the survey, producing a bias against truants. For information on parents' occupations, attitudes and behaviour, the surveys have to rely on pupils - not always a reliable source. Additionally, most have not tried to link the survey data to school records, examination results or actual post-16 destinations. Thus while self-completion surveys are useful for obtaining data at low cost from large samples and for outlining broad patterns in the data, they are unlikely to produce either precision in estimates or depth in understanding. Once again, the DfES's proposed longitudinal study of young people should produce big improvements in the detail and quality of available data.

So far we have emphasised the limitations of existing quantitative studies. However quantitative studies are outnumbered in the literature by qualitative or ethnographic studies based on very small samples. Such studies are frequently used because they permit the researcher to look in depth at individual cases and to take account of the context in which decisions are made, notably the school, peer group, family and neighbourhood. The fact that small qualitative studies tend to be cheaper than quantitative studies and easier to set up is also relevant to their popularity.

Qualitative studies often make fascinating reading, and they can generate some very interesting ideas. They can also be persuasive and influential. Consequently there is sometimes a danger of assuming that findings that are based on a few arbitrarily chosen young people, observed in very particular circumstances, are generally true and firmly established, when the evidence base is in reality very slender. There is a need for better links between qualitative and quantitative studies, so that ideas emerging from qualitative research can be tested on larger and more systematic samples. Sometimes of course the nature of the ideas emerging from qualitative research is such that they are not readily amenable to testing by quantitative methods. In such cases the evidence base could be strengthened by a more systematic approach to qualitative work. More specifically, there

is sometimes a need to replicate findings on different samples drawn from a wider range of contexts, and to reduce the influence of individual researchers with strong prior views.

There has been particularly heavy reliance on qualitative work for studying the experiences and choices of young people from minority ethnic groups. This has been dictated by the fact that even in very large national surveys such as the England and Wales Youth Cohort Study, the number of respondents within separate minority ethnic groups is often too small to permit anything beyond the simplest of analyses. This problem should be corrected by the DfES's proposed longitudinal study of young people, the design of which is intended to yield sub-samples of reasonable size within each of the larger minority ethnic groups.

Some specific issues

Though the evidence base for understanding choice at 16 needs generally to be strengthened, there are some areas where it seems particularly thin. This final section briefly highlights some aspects of post-16 choices that appear to the present author to be not well understood, but which are nevertheless potentially important for policy.

We know that the schools that young people attend affect their decisions about whether to stay in full-time education after 16, even after allowing for differences between schools in their pupils' GCSE results, home background and other relevant factors. However, how exactly schools exert this influence is not well understood: several easily measured factors such as the pupil-teacher ratio, whether the school is single-sex or co-educational and the length of experience of the staff seem to be unimportant. It seems likely that more subtle processes are involved, such as perhaps the quality of leadership in the school, the level of morale and motivation amongst both staff and pupils, and the degree to which all pupils feel included in school life. These processes are difficult to study in a systematic fashion. Nevertheless a better understanding of how they work would be useful, not only in helping young people to make the most of their opportunities at 16, but also in tackling the wider problem of pupils who effectively reject school some years before they become legally entitled to leave.

Another issue that has perhaps received less attention than it deserves concerns the very large geographical differences that exist in rates of participation in post-compulsory education. Large variations are evident in regional statistics, and variations are also found between smaller localities, though these are less well charted. As with differences between schools, geographical differences in post-16 participation rates are not subject to simple explanations in terms of the standard factors that predict staying on at the individual level. It seems clear that the structures of both local and regional labour markets play a role, but these do not operate in a simple or straightforward fashion. Locally based systems of attitudes, expectations and beliefs are also relevant, and these cultural factors may be resistant to change. The factors involved in geographical

influences almost certainly interact with school level influences on choice at 16, and the two need to be studied together.

The literature reveals some debate about the role of GNVQs amongst post-16 options. There are questions about the reasons why young people choose GNVQs and how they go on to use their qualifications once they have obtained them, together with considerable scepticism over parity of esteem with A levels. At present little is known about the extent to which GNVQs form the basis of a career in the relevant vocational field, or the extent to which they are used simply as entry qualifications for education or training in fields that are unrelated. To resolve these issues we need new research that tracks the progress of GNVQ students after they have finished their courses.

There is also a lack of clarity in the literature about the position of work-based training amongst young people's options at 16. Although trainees on good quality apprenticeship schemes seem generally happy with their choice, there is also evidence that many young people and their teachers have negative perceptions of work-based training. This somewhat mixed picture suggests that research into the role of work-based training needs to distinguish more carefully between different types of schemes. We need to avoid treating training schemes that aim for different levels of qualifications, teaching different types of skills and carried out in different contexts under different conditions as though they formed a unitary phenomenon. The under-representation of young people from minority ethnic groups in work-based training also requires more investigation. Although the preferences of some minority ethnic groups for academic education have a role here, it is important to establish how big a part is played by racial discrimination by training providers.

Finally in this personal list of research priorities is the question of the impact that careers education and guidance (CEG) has on young people's choices. Good CEG has been shown to improve young people's careers-related skills as measured by tests. It has commonly been assumed that as a result young people who receive good CEG will make better choices at 16 and be more likely to succeed in reaching their career goals, with lower rates of drop-out and failure on their post-16 pathways. However this assumption is based on an inference for which there appears to be little direct evidence in the UK. This does not mean that CEG has been shown to be ineffective; rather there is a lack of evidence primarily because the conditions for conducting a proper test of the effectiveness of CEG have not been met. This omission points yet again to the potential value of a carefully conducted large-scale quantitative longitudinal study tracking young people through the secondary school years and on into their early careers.

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