

## Chapter 1

# Introduction

### Background and research focus

The school-to-work transition has been described as a crucial phase in the life course, one in which young people make choices and decisions which may be critical in setting the direction of their future lives (for example, Ball, Maguire and Macrae, 2000a). With the de-standardisation of the life course and young people having to cope with discontinuities in their education and work careers, transitions are said to have become increasingly complex (Heinz and Krüger, 2001). Vocational education and training is an important arena within which young people make decisions, and one which has been undergoing substantial reform, in terms of both structure and content, involving a vast array of possible and sometimes uncertain outcomes.

While the interplay of structure and agency is a prevailing theme in the existing literature on school-to-work transition, studies have commonly emphasised the role of one over the other. Thus, outcomes concerning post-compulsory pathways are typically explained in terms of individualisation (for example, Heinz, 2002; Witzel and Kühn, 1999), or, more commonly, socialisation theory (for example, Banks et al., 1992; Bloomer and Hodgkinson, 1997). The latter studies have demonstrated the continued relevance of structural factors, above all social class, in determining the distribution of resources and choice of transition pathways. Similarly, research on young people's experiences of work-based learning has focused on the reproduction of social class and, in particular, the role of organisational and occupational identity (for example, Colley et al., 2003).

On the whole, these studies have tended to neglect the rich biographical experiences of young people, and hence the complex nature of identity construction. As the studies lack an adequate conceptualisation of identity, biographical events and experiences are often drawn upon superficially and selectively. While many are longitudinal in design, they typically follow young people only over a relatively short period of time. Also, drawing on the dominant discourse of the academic-vocational divide (Pring, 1995) and neglecting young people's perspectives and experiences, much research dismisses vocational choices and constructs young people as failures and second-chance learners.

Working class students are commonly viewed as constituting a homogenous whole of 'practical' learners with enduring identities. The challenge for me in my own research was to take a more holistic approach to the study of school-to-work transitions.

This book is based on my doctoral thesis which I undertook, on a part-time basis, from October 2007 to September 2011. It examines the school-to-work transitions of young people in contrasting national policy and vocational education contexts—the apprenticeship systems in England and Germany. Adopting a comparative, multi-method ethnographic approach, combining biographic-interpretive interviews with participant observation, it explores the construction of learner biographies as temporal and context-specific; how young people negotiate their learner identities over time and in the context of particular learning environments. Distinguishing it from existing research, it is particularly concerned with young people's situated subjectivities, including their changing perspectives, over time and in different contexts: how they experience and act upon their environments, particular situations and events. Rather than using evidence selectively, the biographical approach allows for the reconstruction of young people's biographies, how certain dispositions and identities of learning were formed over time, in particular situations and environments, and how these led to further experiences of learning and hence processes of identity formation to the point where young people begin their apprenticeship, which constitutes a new arena for identity construction with its own rules and discursive framework.

A particular concern of the study is with the relationship between learners and the social identities (Goffman, 1968a) of occupations and pathways (and the norms and values that underpin them); the ways in which young people actively negotiate their self-identities; and the co-construction (production and re-production) of social structures and particular 'learning cultures' (James and Biesta, 2007). The concept of a learning culture serves to explore the ways in which learning environments are shaped by social contexts and the actors, such as tutors and learners, within them. The study goes beyond narrow conceptions of occupational or organisational identity by exploring the processes of identity construction as young people negotiate multiple identities, moving in a variety of social contexts. It is built on the work of Judith Butler (1990) on performativity which offers a valuable framework for understanding identities as discursively constructed, rather than as 'given' or natural, combined with the biographical

approach of Alheit (2002, 2003), which emphasises the need for understanding meaning-making within the unique biographical experiences of individuals.

The book looks at apprenticeship as a 'universally understood model of learning' (Fuller and Unwin, 2009: 414), which involves the acquisition of skills, knowledge and values of a particular occupation, coupled with a 'process of maturation' that enables the individual to 'grow into the behaviours and understandings associated with being a useful citizen and a sense of self' (ibid.: 405). By comparing retail and motor vehicle apprentices in England and Germany, the study looked at different institutional contexts as constituted by contrasting apprenticeship programmes (one in the traditional craft sector, the other in the service sector) and contrasting vocational education and labour market systems (Germany and England) and their impact on transitions and young people's perspectives in relation to learning. While the German model famously centres on the notion of *Beruf*, or vocation (Deissinger, 2008), and involves apprenticeship as the continuation of education and development of the person, the English system has traditionally focused on skill formation in the workplace (for example, Ryan, 1999).

Apprenticeship presents an interesting and timely case because of its current prominence in the UK government's approach to raising post-compulsory participation in education and its comparatively low status (Fuller and Unwin, 2008) in a country which has privileged higher education. In the current climate of high youth unemployment and a contracting university sector with rising fees, expanding the apprenticeship system has been of heightened concern for the coalition government. At the same time, there has been growing criticism of low quality schemes, raising questions about the government's aim of making apprenticeship a genuine alternative to higher education. This contrasts with the high-status German dual system of apprenticeship, which increasingly attracts school leavers with higher educational qualifications (Hanf, 2011).

In this book, I will argue that young people actively perform socially recognised identities, which they interpret in the contexts of their biographical experience. Learner identities are not natural or abiding, but are formed through concrete experiences of learning and constituted in institutional settings and learning cultures with discursive frameworks that prioritise certain forms of knowledge. Thus, young people may reject certain types of learning and may develop alternative learning careers which they reflexively negotiate. Apprenticeship, therefore, may be a positive choice. However, while apprenticeships in Germany centre on the integration of theory and practice,

vocational education in England is based on the academic-vocational dichotomy and assumptions that vocational learners reject all classroom learning. The learner identities of young people in the two countries reflect these different discourses. Apprenticeship is an important framework for identity construction and the school-to-work transition. In Germany, this constitutes a highly regarded route, which is promoted through the institutional system. By contrast, in England, in its current form, apprenticeship may present a diminished opportunity for young people, undermined by low quality and predominantly practical content, offering limited perspectives in terms of work careers and civic participation.

### **Overview of the structure of the book**

The book is organised in eight chapters. Chapter 2 examines the wider institutional and political context of apprenticeship in England and Germany. The German dual system is well established and based on politics of consensus, leading to comprehensively defined competence in particular occupations. It leads to recognised social positions and is generally associated with relatively smooth transitions. Vocational education is seen as the continuation of general education. By contrast, in England, apprenticeships have historically been weakly regulated and the structure and content vary by sector and by individual employer. In addition, apprenticeship has become an instrument of government policy to increase participation in post-compulsory education. This has led to a lowering of standards and the status as a post-16 educational pathway remains fragile. Recent developments have reinforced the dichotomy of academic and practical learning and raise important issues of social justice.

Chapter 3 reviews some of the key research literature on school-to-work transition in England and Germany. While much of the research is extremely valuable, improving our understanding of the factors shaping transitions, it will be shown that studies tend to lack a proper conceptualisation of identity construction. They have focused on either structuralist or individualist perspectives, while ignoring young people's biographical experiences and thus the complex processes of identity formation.

Chapter 4 begins by outlining the theoretical framework which problematises the concept of identity. It centres on Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990). Young people's identities are not a given, but are discursively produced as they cite social norms and discourses in order to be recognised as subjects by others. The theory stresses the role of individual agency at the same time as

the power of social norms in the discursive production of identities. In addition, the biographical approach, based on writers such as Ricoeur (1992) and Alheit (2002, 2003), emphasises the need to understand meaning-making within the unique biographical experiences of individuals. As individuals seek to make sense of their lives, they constantly interpret and re-interpret their past and present experience, shaping their anticipation for the future and guiding their action.

These theoretical premises underpin the methodological framework of the research. The study uses a multi-method ethnographic approach, combining in-depth biographical interviews with multi-site participant observation. It centres on biographical interviews (Wengraf 2001) so as to explore an individual's learner identity as it is constructed over time and in multiple social contexts. This is complemented by participant observation in the young people's workplaces and colleges to provide an insight into the learning cultures of sites which are assumed to be an essential part of apprenticeships and hence of the young people's construction of identity.

Chapter 5 introduces the different learning sites and draws on the findings from the participant observations. It provides the context and thus sets the scene for the discussion in Chapters 6 and 7. However, it goes beyond this and seeks to capture the overall learning cultures of the workplaces and colleges and gain an understanding of the ways in which learner identities were being constructed. This includes an exploration of the institutional context of the content and structure of apprenticeships and how this was interpreted by apprentices, their tutors and co-workers in interaction with each other. The analysis considers tutor discourses, the ways in which the young people were expected to learn, and the values afforded to occupations, apprenticeships and learning. While certain dominant identities were identified, it became clear that a range of identities co-existed, as the discursive framework of sites intercepted with the young people's biographical backgrounds.

Chapters 6 and 7 present the comparative analysis of individual case studies, based on the biographical interviews and fieldwork notes. A major finding is the role of apprenticeship as a means for identification in the transition to adulthood. In relation to retail (Chapter 6), the analysis explores the ways in which the young people construct 'secure' and 'fragile' identities and the extent to which retail apprenticeships offered a means of identification. It highlights the difference in status and quality of the German and English schemes. However, other factors, notably family background and the experience of discontinuities, play a role. The identity of motor vehicle maintenance apprentices in both

England and Germany centred first and foremost on the practical know-how associated with the occupation (Chapter 7). While the German young people valued the apprenticeship as a comprehensive training occupation, based on the integration of theory and practice, for three of the English apprentices it pivoted on mechanics as a predominantly practical craft. However, detailed analysis revealed a much more nuanced picture of identity formation, calling into question previous studies which present vocational education students as a homogenous group of 'practical' learners.

In Chapter 8, some of the key findings are discussed with particular reference to the conceptual and methodological framework developed in this study. First, based on participant observation in the colleges, the construction of learning cultures is explored and attention is drawn once more to the ways in which identities are constituted through the discursive frameworks of institutional settings. Following this, it is shown how the young people's biographies reveal a more nuanced picture of identity construction. A further section draws out the implications for policy and, in particular, the importance of providing quality apprenticeships as a framework for identity construction and for the transition from school to work. The chapter concludes by revisiting the literature while outlining the key contribution of the new conceptual and methodological framework to the study of school-to-work transition and the (discursive) construction of learner identities.