Editorial

Young lives in transition: From school to adulthood?

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Introduction

Why are young people of interest to international development? Eighty-five per cent of the global youth population live in Africa, Latin America and Asia (UNDESA, 2011). Depending on the perspective of the author, they either represent a significant development problem or a valuable constituency (for example, young people's role in political and environmental activism). The potential of youth lies in what Cole (2004) calls their 'structural liminality', which means that in many settings they can move freely through society and take advantage of new social and economic opportunities. They often have the time, skills and motivation to be critics or activists; hence the distrust or hostility shown by many governments towards this group. Globalisation may allow (some) young people to build trans-regional solidarities, as shown by the events of the 'Arab Spring' in 2011. It may also enable them to migrate or build connections with international organisations (the extent to which these opportunities are genuinely available to the majority of young people in developing countries is discussed in the papers that follow).

Typically, however, the promises of globalisation have preceded the resources required to realise them. As highlighted by Jeffrey and McDowell (2004), youth transitions appear paradoxically to be simultaneously slowing, owing to longer periods in education and a lack of secure employment, and accelerating, owing to family breakdown, migration to attend schools, and early entry into the labour market. This creates a 'cruel irony' where 'as Western ideals of youth transition to adulthood through the grasping of new social and economic opportunities have been exported outside Euro-America, it has become increasingly difficult for young people in Third World settings to emulate these ideas' (ibid, p. 137). At the same time, however, despite the singular, linear and individualised trajectories implicit in policy documents such as 'Development and the Next Generation' (World Bank, 2006), the process of being recognised as an adult involves crossing and re-crossing boundaries. These boundaries extend beyond school-to-work to encompass leaving home, entering into sexual relationships, becoming a citizen and so on, all of which are interrelated and may even be simultaneous (Punch, 2002). This special issue addresses the meaning of the porous and context-specific boundaries between childhood and adulthood in a range of developing countries, and highlights the ambiguous role of education and employment in young people's 'trajectories'.¹ It explores key characteristics of youth transitions such as their complex, multiple and contested nature, and the way they are shaped by and often reproduce social differentiation and inequality.

The special issue brings together papers by members of the Literacy and Development Group at the University of East Anglia (www.uea.ac.uk/ssf/literacy), as well as others beyond it, all of which highlight the complex linkages between schooling, work and identity (Heissler, Rao); the ways in which institutions and structures support or threaten

these (Hay, Froerer); and the meanings and purposes of education (Hoechner, Camfield). On the basis of studies in specific locations in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, they tackle key questions within international development policy and practice, such as (i) the relative value of schooling, especially post-primary; (ii) the inevitable trade-offs between access to schooling and quality of schooling; (iii) the potential role of 'education' in its broadest sense in slowing the intergenerational transfer of poverty; and (iv) the effects of schooling and lack of expected employment opportunities on individual subjectivities and social cohesion.

There are six empirical papers grouped under two linked headings: (i) Education and Aspirations, and (ii) Transitions and Trajectories. The papers highlight the influence of gender, class and ethnicity on young people's aspirations and experiences. They focus on schooling and work, as these are seen as the main means of transitioning to a materially successful adulthood, and outline the fluid movements between work and school, the supportive role of social networks and of families as a place of apprenticeship, and the intergenerational dynamics of education and aspiration. They also address tensions between expectations and experiences, and the ambiguous role played by formal education, which on the macro-level appears to reproduce inequality in the manner described by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), while at the micro-level provides sites of sociality and networking (Ansell, 2004). The empirical papers are followed by two explicitly theoretical contributions (Orkin, Jeffrey) that reflect on the challenges of situating individual accounts within local and global political economies and investigating the impact of these on young people's futures. This introduction briefly reviews some of the concepts used in recent ethnographic writing on young people, which arguably has a stronger empirical grounding than explanations centred on the 'youth bulge' (for example Urdal, 2004). It then summarises the papers and highlights common conclusions and their implications for policy and programme design.

Conceptual Framework

Much of the writing on young people is oriented towards their imagined future, as productive citizens. It is typically framed in terms of a *life course* that moves through distinct, sequential life stages such as childhood, youth, adulthood and old age (Aries, 1962). However, the rigid life-stage models developed in the early 1920s have been supplemented by more flexible and empirically informed understandings of young people's experiences. These are framed in terms of youth transitions, critical events or 'vital conjunctures' (Johnson-Hanks, 2002), as pathways or 'social navigations' (Vigh, 2009), or as memberships of (social) generations or cohorts. The shift away from life stages was prompted by recognition that many young people's trajectories are neither linear nor teleological, as in some settings they will never achieve the social status of adults. For example, Jeffrey (2008, p. 741) describes how unemployed young men in Northern India feel multiply excluded, from the successful trajectories of peers, from the promises of development and from adulthood itself:

Young men's inability to move quickly from school or university into secure employment has created a generation of educated men in their later teens and twenties who often remain unmarried, are unable to establish financial independence, and are widely identified as 'young' (Ruddick, 2003). This generation is older than those featuring in much sociological and anthropological literature, but, like 'youths' discussed in other contexts, these young men

commonly define themselves as distinct from adults, are engaged in an active search for employment, and remain preoccupied with questions of culture, style, and respect.

These young men are experiencing what Bourdieu (1984, p. 150) describes as the ‘broken trajectory effect’, where the failure to achieve in education or fulfil family roles results in ‘blighted hope or frustrated promise’. Although a life-stage model clearly does not represent many young people’s realities, its pervasiveness arguably ensures that it provides the (often unrealistic) standard that they measure themselves against. Johnson-Hank’s (2002) research on motherhood in Cameroon provides an alternative concept of ‘vital conjunctures’ that captures the variable order of attaining markers of adulthood. Vital conjunctures also acknowledge that identities can shift from adult to youth to adult within the course of a day, depending on the context. This indeterminacy of identity is evident in the papers in this volume, where the attainment of adulthood is precarious and not necessarily related to age (for example, the domestic workers in their thirties who are referred as ‘daughter’ (Rao)).

Young people in developing countries face a combination of the decline of state welfare systems since the 1980s and economic collapse leading to the restructuring of local labour markets. Global economic changes have failed to generate white-collar jobs in manufacturing or services to replace those lost in state cutbacks. In many countries, the situation is exacerbated by recent recessions and economic volatility owing to dependence on a narrow range of commodities. This means that at the same moment that young people are being exposed to images of successful adulthoods based on education and professional employment, economic pressures have prompted them to take greater responsibility for the social reproduction of their households rather than attaining the supposed independence of adulthood. Weiss’s (2004, p. 15) introduction to his edited volume on the impact of neoliberal processes in Africa on young people’s subjectivities describes how

In the current moment, education has become one of the most poignant illustrations of the polarizing structure of neoliberal processes. Indeed, education itself is often taken as a simple index of youth’s contemporary crisis, as though the ‘failures’ of education were causes of this crisis, rather than symptoms of a wider recasting of sociality.

One of the reasons for this is that young people who continue schooling may not have the social skills or connections to succeed in highly competitive job markets (see Froerer, Heissler, this volume). The result is educated unemployment or underemployment, a problem first identified by Dore (1976) and intensified during the 1990s and 2000s owing to increasing secondary school enrolment. Education is clearly a ‘contradictory resource’ (Froerer) that provides opportunities for some young people while drawing others into systems of inequality. The papers in this volume provide examples of how formal schooling can reproduce class- and gender-based norms in the absence of other forms of social development such as employment. Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of cultural and social capital are helpful in understanding these processes, as they show, for example, how young people respond to unemployment by competing for resources and respect within different fields or ‘gaming spaces’ or trying to preserve educated habituses (Heissler). Bourdieu describes how people’s ‘feel for the game’ enables them to succeed in these fields when faced with others who lack these skills, as in the case of the Oraon Christians described in Froerer, this volume.

Another concept that emerges from the papers is that of *time*, both in the way economic crises have created a temporal rupture in young people’s lives and the experience of surplus time and being part of a ‘culture of waiting’. Hoechner, this volume, describes how the Almajirai feel disconnected from the economic and social changes in urban Nigeria while

trying to consciously disconnect themselves from negative stereotypes and work perceived as demeaning. Across all the papers in this issue, young people's temporal anxieties reflect frustration about unemployment, exclusion from secure adulthood, and isolation relative to the time-spaces of 'modernity' and 'development.' These are themes that recur in Jeffrey's work, for example in the story of Rajesh, a long-term student at Meerut College in Uttar Pradesh who had obtained a BA, a BEd, an MA in political science, an MA in history, an MA in agriculture and a PhD (Jeffrey 2010). Rajesh provides an extreme example of what Jeffrey dubs 'timepass' – a form of class-specific 'social suffering' – as he has no opportunities to obtain white-collar employment.

Despite gerontocratic structures, exacerbated by current economic conditions, most young people are able to exercise some degree of *agency*. Many writers emphasise the subaltern quality of this agency, for example Katz's (2004) comparison of young people in the Sudan and New York, which characterises it as 'resourcefulness'. However, young people are employing strategies as well as tactics, as illustrated in the papers by Heissler and Froerer, and are engaging creatively with circulating discourses. Heissler emphasises that young people's agency is profoundly social and that they progress through building networks with peers and adults. Agency in this sense involves cultivating interdependency rather than exercising autonomy, which may be a truer representation of adulthood in many societies (Punch, 2002).

Finally, what effect does all this have on young people's experiences and self-perceptions? The theme of *respect* emerges as important in all the papers, and especially in Rao, Heissler and Hoechner. It is supported by previous work (for example Mains, 2007; Jeffrey, 2010) on how young men cultivate an identity as 'unemployed youth' by continuing to study and not marrying until they are able to get salaried employment. While wealthier parents can provide extended support to their children, there are numerous studies showing the negative effect of unemployment on adult well-being (for example Clark and Oswald, 1994), especially in places where the male breadwinner is the norm. Young men's subjective well-being may also be lowered by their representation as idle, immoral, criminal and so on, which is particularly in evidence in Hoechner's paper.

The papers in this issue show how young people's trajectories are increasingly de-standardised, presenting them with a bewildering array of options. However, this change may not represent an increase in the choices available, given that the alternatives are not equally valued or equally accessible, depending on a variety of factors that include location, gender, birth order, family background, local social and economic institutions and so on. For example, while girls in Ethiopia are said to be constrained by their lack of opportunities, analysis from Young Lives, an international study of childhood poverty, suggests that their likelihood of making successful transitions is reduced by having too many potentially contradictory opportunities too soon (Camfield and Tafere, 2011). This contrasts with the experiences of, for example, a middle-class teenager in Addis Abba who might be concentrating on her studies and not planning to marry until she has completed university and secured a job with an international organisation.

The Papers

Education and Aspirations

The first paper, by *Camfield*, explores changes in aspirations and experiences of schooling over time in an urban Ethiopian community. The paper reports universally positive

attitudes to education within the population of young people sampled by Young Lives, an international study of childhood poverty (www.younglives.org.uk). However, despite the high aspirations of this sample, there are few places at universities and high rates of unemployment and underemployment. While these conditions are common in many developing countries, in Ethiopia they are acute and exacerbated by the lack of opportunities for migration, especially for young men, who are the focus of the paper. The paper highlights the irony implicit in the representation of young people (men) as simultaneously a threat or a 'wasted generation' and the 'leaders of tomorrow' and links this to the events of the 'Arab Spring'. Camfield notes the importance of respect in a context of extreme economic and political marginalisation, an observation made in other studies of young people (for example Mann, 2010) and numerous participatory poverty assessments.

The paper also records a trade-off between the striking increases in enrolment and the quality of education the students receive, especially in Grade 1 (independent confirmation of this is provided by the high drop-out rates and low Early Grade Reading Assessment Scores for those who make it to Grade 2). This has been observed in other settings such as rural India, where a combination of the Midday Meal Scheme and the lack of alternative early years provision has encouraged the enrolment of very young children. This has obvious consequences for the quality of education in Grade 1, which for many children is the only education they receive.

Froerer's paper explores how the 'powerful social institution of education' is reducing the extent to which caste can act as an instrument of social control in the tribal village of Mohanpur. In the place of caste-based social exclusion, education generates and justifies new inequalities based on qualifications and related forms of cultural capital. The paper highlights the role of the Catholic church in providing both educational opportunities, in the form of a high-quality private boarding school, and the social capital required to make use of this education (for example, by facilitating introductions to Christian employers in the cities). While the tuition at the boarding school is high quality, perhaps more important is the rule that only Hindi be spoken. This enables tribal children to become fluent in the national language and facilitates future migration and engagement with government officials. The schooling creates a type of embodied capital, also expressed in accent, dress and attitude, which cannot be erased. The habitus of students includes 'confidence and conviction, determination and perseverance, comportment and correct forms of speech and behaviour that convey a more appropriate demeanour to those in important positions outside of the village'. These attributes are then naturalised, enabling the upwardly mobile Oraon to 'invoke new hierarchical inequalities based on the inevitability of "natural intelligence", "merit" or "gifts", and thereby discourage less successful groups from investing in "intrinsically beneficial" endeavours like education'.

The third paper, by *Hoechner*, engages with a central theme of the special issue, which is what happens to young people who cannot conform to the standard of modern childhood encoded in formal schooling. She documents feelings of failure and frustration, but also examples of resourcefulness and self-respect among the Almajirai, peripatetic Qur'anic students in urban Northern Nigeria. The case study of the Almajirai illustrates processes of rising aspirations, including changes in the local definition of what it means to be educated. It foregrounds debates about the relevance and quality of schooling, which is failing to equip children for a modern economy while deskilling them for a traditional one. The paper shows how changes in the local political economy, including the rise of reformist Islamic or Islamiya education, have pushed the Almajirai system to the margins. But at the same time it has failed

to provide other educational opportunities to poor, rural communities as neo-liberal reforms shift the financial burden of education from the state to the family.

Hoechner cautions that ‘narratives of exclusion translating into frustration translating into violence [...] fail to capture the complexities of young people’s creative engagements with the failing promises of an exclusionary modernity’. She notes that a ‘protective shield’ is provided by ‘the Almajirai-identity and the “moral capital” associated with it [...] which] made it possible for the young people I got to know not to resent the better-off, and to embrace the hope to advance themselves through western education in the future’. However, Hoechner recognises the fragility of this, and is currently exploring the conditions under which this shield breaks down.

Transitions and Trajectories

Child–adult transitions and schooling and work experiences in rural Bangladesh are the subject of *Heissler’s* paper. This focuses on the experiences of young migrants, three-quarters of whom come from households that are ‘functionally landless’. It addresses the perceived risks of continuing in secondary education, such as experiences of shame where educated boys feel compelled to migrate so they will not be seen doing work that they feel is beneath them. Despite this, the perceived value of education has increased for all households and is linked to aspirations for higher-status work or ‘chakri’, which usually requires migration. Chakri is not accessible to all, however, as appointments usually require a bribe of 100 000–200 000 taka, which few households can afford. For this reason Heissler argues that ‘the claims of education to deliver secure work with status cannot overcome the more powerful institutional and structural barriers that necessitate families having money to buy “good” employment and for girls’ dowry’.

Hay provides an ethnographic account of the transitions from childhood to adulthood made by second-generation Bhatu migrants living in an impoverished community in Delhi. Her focus is on opportunities for informal learning provided through work and family life and the limited role formal education plays in young people’s life courses. Hay explores the gendered nature of learning and of earning authority and respect in, respectively, the community (men) and the household (women). She looks at how these processes are changing ‘as ever younger females face estrangement and widowhood because of the illness, incapacity and death of ever younger earning males due to alcohol and drug dependency’. Although young women’s status is changing for the better owing to the perception of males as ‘shirking and failing to meet their responsibilities’, she notes that these changes are also ‘working to entrench inequality and poverty that will go on to shape another generation’s experiences’.

Rao’s paper addresses the theme of respect by examining the increasing migration of adolescent girls from tribal areas to Delhi as domestic workers. This is part of a global trend where ‘young female migrant workers from poor, undeveloped regions [...] service the affluent across the world’ (for example, Ethiopian girls’ migration to the Middle East). The paper describes limitations to their agency and their struggles to gain respect at work and when they return home to the village. The emphasis on respect redresses the balance in previous accounts of domestic work that neglected workers’ desire for prestige and upward social mobility: ‘they draw from this experience, materially (incomes, skills and familiarity with consumption goods), and discursively (cultural representation), to strengthen their claims for respect’.

Rao outlines how for this group formal education does not increase employability, as proficiency in mainstream languages, use of technology such as mobile phones and ‘qualities of loyalty and submission’ are more highly valued. She argues that in the same way that schooling deskills children for agricultural work, the emphasis of schooling on individual results and competition makes it less likely that they will develop what Hochschild (1983) characterises as ‘soft skills’.

Despite concerns about status and social mobility, Rao notes that the main driver of migration is the neglect of the agricultural sector in tribal areas. As in Froerer and Heissler’s papers, migrants make these ‘choices’ owing to factors ‘including those of language, discrimination [...] and lack of access to educated jobs in the absence of money to pay bribes and social contacts’. A perhaps predictable effect of migration is the way it ‘deskills’ women for reintegration into the village as wives: they have been exposed to urban lifestyles, including greater equality between the genders; they do not have sufficient dowry to compensate them for the loss of status from domestic work; and the responsibilities of their natal households towards them when they stop work are far from clear.

Theoretical Perspectives on Youth Transitions

The last paper, by *Orkin* on child work in rural Ethiopia, provides a ‘primer’ as to how qualitative and especially case study research can be used to develop theory. One of the economic assumptions she challenges is that the only characteristic of work and school that is important is the time it takes. She argues persuasively that conflict between work and school mainly occurs where work is either tiring or paid at a piece rate so that it needs to be finished on a single occasion. Orkin notes the effects of school rules, calendars or timetables that are not flexible to children’s economic activities, all of which are potentially modifiable through policy. She suggests that models should differentiate between attitudes to household chores, work on the family farm and paid work for employers, as these are very different. These additional nuances provide valuable information to policymakers/practitioners, as they indicate where subtle but important changes can be made to enable children to combine schooling and work more successfully.

The commentary by *Jeffrey* is a thought-provoking response to the papers, which endorses Orkin’s argument about the continued value of qualitative research to international development. Jeffrey critiques life-stage models as both inadequate representations of young people’s lives in developing countries and ‘ideological constructs with social effects [which...] exert their own type of symbolic violence’ on young people’s subjectivities. He uses Mannheim to argue for greater attention to intergenerational conflict and collaboration, emphasising the latter as an important support to young people’s agency. Finally, he draws attention to the disciplinary location and research focus of many of the contributors, highlighting the ways in which this contributes to a lack of attention to young people as oppressors and the potential of schools and universities to become ‘sites of violence’.

Conclusion

The aim of this special issue, and the 2010 Development Studies Association conference panel that preceded it, was to bring together papers using survey and qualitative data collected over time to explore complex linkages between schooling, work and identity, the

role of institutions and structures, and the meanings and purposes of education. Other themes have emerged from the papers such as respect, shame, time and what it means to frame the passing of time as a life course, aspirations and the capital required to achieve these, and encounters with the global economic system. The questions these pose for international development are broad: How can we avoid doing violence to others by our representations? And specifically: how can schools in rural Ethiopia respond flexibly to working children?

The implications I would like to draw for policymakers relate primarily to education, which is the theme that unites the papers. Orkin, for example, argues that children's educational interests are not well-served by crude binaries between work and school. It would be more helpful to look at the characteristics of work and the characteristics of schools and see how these can be brought into alignment to increase the likelihood of children continuing to attend. Froerer, Heissler and Orkin identify Grade 5, which is the start of lower secondary schooling in many countries, as the end of schooling for many children (this is particularly true of girls, who are by then entering puberty). This finding places a responsibility on governments to ensure that by this point children are literate, numerate and equipped with other skills necessary to their future lives.

Heissler and Rao question the relevance of schooling, even for those working in urban environments. Rao suggests that its individualistic emphasis may work against the development of relational skills that will be more helpful in future life. Many of the papers note that despite the assumed connection between education and salaried employment, education alone is rarely sufficient to secure a good job. Applicants need to be informed, mobile, socially connected, well-presented and well-resourced, and in Rao's context able to use a mobile phone to secure a position. For this reason education can seem like a risky investment, especially as there may be negative consequences in terms of school leavers' motivation and the way they are perceived by others. Ethiopia (Orkin, Camfield) provides an interesting contrast to India (Hay, Rao), as it is currently experiencing a massive expansion of its higher education sector, but in doing so it risks creating a context of over-education combined with under-employment, as identified by Jeffrey (2010) in Uttar Pradesh.

Those excluded from the schooling system nonetheless find creative ways to operate by drawing on their social networks and their own ingenuity (examples of this are given in Heissler and Hoechner's papers). Hay's paper in particular emphasises the importance of informal learning through the family and the workplace, highlighting encouragingly that education does not end at the school gates. She echoes the conclusion of many of the papers in this issue in suggesting that young people's interactions and their socio-economic environments are more powerful influences on the course of their lives than formal education.

While many of the papers focus implicitly or explicitly on young men (Camfield, Hoechner), the others explore female experiences of schooling, labour migration (as domestic or garment workers) and day-to-day survival in harsh economic conditions. Heissler and Froerer note various barriers to female education, including the risk that they will find it harder to find a husband owing to an escalation in the cost of their dowry and men's reluctance to have a wife who is more educated. For these reasons, Heissler suggests that Bangladesh's Female Secondary School Assistance Program may only be reaching those richer households who were already planning to send their daughters to secondary school.

In addition to highlighting intersections between gender and class, or religion and opportunity, to emphasise the complexity of the influences on young people's lives the

papers look at the effect of economic pressures and uncertainties on individual subjectivities. Whether these are young women with alcoholic partners, Almajirai reviled in the media, or migrant domestic workers uncertain as to what awaits them when their age compels them to return home, they tell a powerful story of the gap between aspirations and realities for young people worldwide, which presents a great challenge for future social and economic development.

Note

1. Within this special issue, children are defined as aged 5–15 and youth as aged 16–30. ‘Young people’ is used to refer to children and youth collectively.

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