

RETHINKING TRANSITION: EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION & THE TRANSITION TO ADULT LIFE



Edited by Carol Varlaam



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Introduction: Rethinking Transition

Carol Varlaam

Only ten years ago, in the early 1970s, nearly three-quarters of 16–19-year-olds were employed, of whom about one-fifth were in jobs with day or block release for further education and training. Ten per cent were in full-time education in colleges, 17 per cent in schools. Youth unemployment was negligible.

A survey of job destinations of 1972 school leavers, conducted because employers were having problems recruiting sufficient numbers, found that successful employers used advertizing effectively and also took applicants' wishes into account, particularly with regard to offering training.¹

In the education world the main talking point was the raising of the school leaving age (RoSLA) from 15 to 16, to take effect in 1972–73. Curriculum development work alternated with dissension and apprehension as the prospect became reality. Many argued that the new stayers-on would be difficult to contain in school, preferring to be out at work.

The situation changed dramatically when a number of events and underlying trends peaked in the early and mid-1970s, with effects far beyond their immediate sphere of activity. In 1973–74 the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) raised the price of oil sharply. This was not unexpected nor, indeed, unfair, given the exploitation of the resources of these countries by the developed Western world for decades. However, the price increases were introduced with such speed that international balances and inter-relationships between debtor and creditor countries fluctuated wildly. There were critical and long-term effects on every aspect of economies, both national and international, and on virtually every spending service within nations.

A situation of at least equal importance if lacking in similar dramatic impact was the increasing reliance by industry on technolo-

gical change to maintain or improve productivity while reducing the need for manpower. This process has been going on since the very beginning of the Industrial Revolution, as inventors sought to improve the efficiency of their machinery to increase production at a lower cost. The Luddite riots of the 1820s were a protest by displaced workers against the introduction of new technology. The process, however, has been accelerating in the past quarter of a century and has really taken off in the past decade or so. To give just one example, the silicon chip has completely altered, in some cases destroyed, traditional industries in a number of countries, for instance car production, watch making, communications. The debate continues as to whether new technology will in the long run reduce the total number of jobs or replace them and possibly increase them by different types of employment. In the short term jobs and whole industries have disappeared with startling rapidity.

One reason for the speed of change is the international nature of the economy in the late twentieth century. No country can be self-sufficient. Each nation's production and consumption are interdependent with those of many others. While attempts may be made to erect barriers to protect vulnerable industries the need to compete internationally for markets makes this viable only in the short term.

There are, of course, differential effects from these events and trends, both between countries and within a given country as industries tend to be concentrated in regions where their raw materials are, or for historical production reasons. When a dominant local industry collapses it has enormous effects in the locale, in addition to the effects on the national economy. The United Kingdom has suffered many examples of this in recent years.

Changes in demographic trends have also been important in the past decade. As a result of higher birthrates in the UK from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s there was a significant increase in the number of young people reaching school leaving age from 1970 onwards. In 1969–70 there were 691,000 school leavers; by 1975–76 there were 817,000, a rise of 18.2 per cent with the peak in 1982. Over the same period married women became much more active in the labour market. An additional one million married women entered the labour force between 1971 and 1976. There was an overall increase in the female working population in the first half of the 1970s while the male working population remained stable for several years and then declined. Finally, fewer people were reaching retirement age because of a slump in births around the period of the 1914–18 war.

With the rapid and far-reaching changes taking place in the economy and the increased numbers of school leavers emerging each year youth unemployment began to rise, beginning in 1974. It was not just that more leavers were on the Register in August a few months after leaving but they were still without employment in December or January. Long-term unemployment became a reality for more people each year.

By the mid-1970s the inter-relationships between youth unemployment, education and training, dormant for decades, reached the centre stage of British political life. In 'normal' times — when there is 'full' employment — there has traditionally been little public discussion of educational objectives, particularly in relation to the transition from school to work. The vast majority of young people usually moved from adolescent dependency as school children to the relative maturity of workers smoothly enough to escape public notice.

However, with rising youth unemployment, the old relationships could no longer be taken for granted. New questions were asked, blame for the situation allocated, according to the perspective of the commentator. Youth unemployment was seen as a temporary aberration, the first signs of the collapse of capitalism, evidence of Machiavelian political intrigue, a damning indictment of the state system of education, etc., varying with the commentator.

The Ruskin Lecture delivered by then Prime Minister Callaghan in October 1976 was a key factor in opening up the debate about the relationship between education and the needs of industrial society. A Prime Ministerial speech on education was, in itself, a phenomenon; education rarely receives national political attention. Callaghan opened up to public discussion the apparent disparity between current educational values and the need to provide young people with the skills, knowledge and understanding necessary to cope with modern industrial society and to lead a full life.

Initially much of the blame for youth unemployment was put on the individual young people. The argument was that if they had worked harder at school/gained some qualifications/had the right attitudes/tried harder to find a job they would not then be without work. This understanding of the situation was well put by Lord Gowrie, when serving as Employment Minister of State: 'All that anyone needs to get a good job is O-level maths, writing ability and some knowledge of science.'² The assumption was that all children were capable of this level of attainment and, of course, that the jobs were available.

More important was the debate about the need for innovation in the school sector. Callaghan had expressed his concern that ‘... on my journeys [I hear] complaints from industry that new recruits from the schools sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job that is required.’³ The initial reaction from education to this sort of criticism, which came not only from politicians but from industry and the media as well, was largely defensive, mainly that there were no data to support any argument that standards had fallen, and asserting that they were indeed improving.

Over the next several years a number of developments occurred within education circles. Several initiatives were concerned with establishing just what was happening in schools, what attainments were. The Assessment of Performance Unit (APU) was set up in a blaze of publicity to measure attainment. HMIs carried out their first ever national survey of secondary education in the late 1970s and found that while some *Aspects* were admirable, other areas needed considerable improvement, particularly those relating to preparation for adult life and careers.⁴ Accountability became a catch phrase, as educationists sought to redefine objectives and the implications of the activities and processes adopted to achieve them.

One theme which occupied many minds and inches of education press comment for months was the debate over a core curriculum. Was such a thing desirable? What was it? How could it be defined and by whom? How could it be achieved? Would it better serve the needs of education than did the existing system? Several authoritative documents were published and discussed; no firm action was taken towards achieving any of the recommendations. The main stumbling block was the continuing adherence to local autonomy in education and the absence of any tradition of centralization, and the fear of its introduction. There was no consensus for change.

In the meantime, youth unemployment continued to rise. The main state response to the problem was the introduction of a series of special measures, perceived as temporary solutions to temporary problems. The Manpower Services Commission (MSC), established in January 1974, was responsible for virtually all these special measures, beginning with the Job Creation Programme (JCP) and Work Experience Programme (WEP) in 1976. The thinking behind WEP rested to some extent on the individual deficit model—that unemployment was somehow the fault of the individual. It also assumed, however, that one characteristic shared by the young unemployed which was amenable to change was their lack of experience in work, when faced with

competition from older experienced workers and married women returning to the labour market. Had the scale of the unemployment problem remained relatively small, as in 1977–78, this approach might have worked. But the numbers of unemployed continued to increase and it became clear that experience alone would not get jobs for youngsters when the jobs simply were not there.

The Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) followed the 1977 Holland Report and quickly became the dominant factor in the 16–19 sphere. YOP was designed to provide a positive solution for what was still expected to be a short-term need for a minority, albeit a large one, of the 16–19 age group.

Between April 1978, when YOP was established, and early summer 1980, 1.4 million young people left school and entered the labour market; 400,000 of them participated in YOPs. Each year unemployed school leavers were guaranteed an offer of a place on a YOP scheme by Easter of the following year.

Initial results of YOP were promising, with up to 70 per cent of YOP graduates going on to full-time employment. However, as youth unemployment continued to rise and jobs to disappear as the recession deepened, the success rate dropped dramatically. By 1980–81 only 30 per cent were going on to full-time employment and there were many complaints of poor quality schemes and substitution of free labour under YOPs for paid employees, thus exacerbating the jobs crisis.

The continuing increase in forecasts of youth unemployment forced a decision on the government: whether to continue to expand the Youth Opportunities Programme in its present form or to introduce a radical new programme of vocational training for school leavers. In the spring of 1982 the latter choice was made, with the publication of the White Paper, *The New Training Initiative*.

That Britain needs a much improved training system has not been seriously disputed by any informed commentator. The basic underlying question for the New Initiative has been, and remains, whether a scheme introduced in haste, largely to keep huge numbers of unemployed young people off the streets, can, at the same time, provide long-term answers to the long-term problem of vocational training needs. The answer remains to be seen. The programme is due to start within weeks of writing and is still largely an unknown quantity. Decisions taken in recent months to overcome problems of supply and resources do not inspire confidence. However, most institutions concerned have given and continue to give full public support to the scheme.

The MSC programmes were largely concerned with the needs of a large proportion of the 16–19 age group rather than the pre-16 population who are the concern of the education sector. It was clear to educationists that there were implications for both pre-16 education and existing educational provision for post-16 groups from MSC initiatives and actions. Just what these implications were and what reaction should or could be taken, however, was far from clear.

The spectre of the MSC hovered over the education world almost from its inception. To some extent this was due to resources. The MSC had the money, in increasing amounts, while education's budget was under tight control and was suffering cuts.

Of equal importance was the nature and age of the institution. The MSC was new, without traditions, precedents, established bureaucracy. It was created to deal with an immediate situation and was given the power and resources to respond not only to that situation but to changes as they occurred, and not just to respond but to initiate. The MSC was largely free from constraints.

Above all, the MSC had almost unquestioned political backing for its initiatives. Though there certainly was dissension, disagreement about the schemes, it usually came from quarters lacking the ability to do anything about it. In the absence of alternative proposals from institutions with power and resources, the MSC continued to dominate the post-16 scene.

Educational institutions, on the other hand, were firmly established in their various moulds — ruts? — with evolved responses to meet previously established needs, particularly the external examination system which dominates the curriculum. Calls for change in the processes and products of the school system were not matched by an equal demand for a reduction in the impact of the qualification system. Indeed the 1980 Education Act re-emphasized its importance by requiring schools to publish their examination results. Schools and colleges also have rigid internal boundaries in their departmental structures which mitigate against any coherent institutional responses to external stimuli.

Thus education generally and schools in particular were not amenable to rapid shifts of policy to take account of different demands from the wider society, especially when, as happened in the past decade, these new needs were not clearly defined. Ultimately, there was no agreement within education on just what were the key questions, much less any agreement on what might be education's answers. The MSC started with a single defined problem and sought

solutions widely. Education argued about the nature of the problem. Neither the DES nor the local education authorities took the lead in dealing with the situation.

Educational response to the stimuli from unemployment itself, MSC activities undertaken as a result of unemployment, and criticism of education generally, occurred on several levels. Nationally the DES, HMIs and the Schools Council advised, surveyed, occasionally pronounced. Most action occurred at local level: LEA or individual schools. Projects were initiated, policies adopted according to local perceptions of local needs. The period 1975–82 covered many innovations, often overlapping and duplicating each other in several local areas, developing in isolation because there were no structures or mechanisms to disseminate ideas, problems and their tentative or partial solutions. There was little coordination of effort, less systematic evaluation of results.

This absence of coordination and dissemination of new developments and good practice within the education sector is important because, whatever happens in mainstream 16–19 education and training, led by the MSC, there will continue to be unresolved issues in pre-16 provision and with particular groups of post-16-year-olds. Some issues predate the events of the past decade. Others have emerged as a result of the complex educational debate. Finally, some situations have been created as indirect, unintended consequences of actions taken in response to changing needs, to suit majority groups.

For example, the question of what to do with the bottom 40 per cent of the school leaving population remains unresolved. The issue was identified in the pre-RoSLA discussions in the early 1970s though the full impact only became apparent after 1972–73, with all pupils staying in school until they reached 16. The concept behind the 16-plus external examination system of GCEs and CSEs, which officially covers only 60 per cent of the age group, implies that 40 per cent are unexaminable. What provision is made for these pupils is a continuing problem, whatever happens to post-school education and training.

The arguments for and against the inclusion of political education in schools provide a second example of a long-term issue. Over the past decade the discussion has been entered into more widely and various initiatives have been taken to build this area of study into many schools.

An important consideration for all education institutions is how to introduce change into existing programmes to meet changing objectives without disrupting those aspects of the existing provision which continue to work successfully. This will continue to be an issue as long

as thought and development remain essential to educational provision.

Some ideas and activities were set in motion or rapidly expanded as a direct result of the 'Great Debate' and the inter-relationships of events over the past decade. The growth of work experience schemes in schools is an example of this. The new focus on the relationship between education and industrial society led to the rapid introduction of a variety of work-related activities to the curriculum of the latter years of statutory schooling.

The massive expansion of state intervention in the transition period from school to adult life, to cope with high youth unemployment, affected sub-groups of 16–19-year-olds differentially. There were unintended consequences for some sub-groups from actions taken to deal with the majority. A prime example lies in the changed life chances of disadvantaged young people — the physically and mentally handicapped, the slow learners. These young people, often at the very bottom of the 40 per cent outside the examination system, have had the benefit of a variety of specialist agencies and services working on their behalf for some years, prior to the rapid changes in the economy. However the events of recent years have dislocated and distorted previous arrangements, to the detriment of this group, unintentionally perhaps but none the less with important effect.

The papers in this collection illuminate some issues within this range of problems and are presented as partial outcomes of one of the few programmes which both linked projects in different regions and included systematic evaluation: the DES/EEC funded Transition to Work programme.⁵

The EEC Transition to Work Programme

The problems Britain was experiencing in the mid-1970s, with youth unemployment and uncertainties about the match between education and the needs of society, were shared by all her European Community partners, with variations only in their extent. As a result of the recognition of these shared problems the Commission of the European Communities and the Ministers of Education of member states resolved, in December 1976, to initiate a Community Action programme on Transition from Education to Working Life. A series of pilot projects was planned, to be based in educational and vocational training institutions in the member states. Funding was shared between the EEC, the national educational authorities and local bodies. A central

coordination and animation body was also included in the programme: IFAPLAN, a Cologne-based social science institute. External evaluation was organized at national level in each country.

The pilot projects, twenty-eight main ones with many subdivisions, were intended to assist national authorities to develop and evaluate policies and strategies for the educational and vocational preparation of young people in their last few years of compulsory education and their early years of further education or training, employment or unemployment. Hundreds of teachers, thousands of young people were involved in the programme between 1978 and 1982.

A number of priority themes were identified, including the educational and training needs of school leavers who had difficulties in finding employment, exploration of measures to stimulate the interest and participation of unmotivated young people towards education and work, development of appropriate measures for groups with special needs: girls, children of migrant workers, slow learners, physically and mentally handicapped young people, improved guidance and counselling programmes, coordination between agencies, improved vocational preparation, in-service training for teachers in these fields.

Each project would concentrate on one or more of these issues, in line with identified national needs. It was hoped that the overall programme in the (then) nine countries would cover the full range of issues. In fact, this was never fully realized. It was evident that national priorities were very similar in each country, so that some issues received more project attention than others. Thus vocational preparation, guidance and counselling and initiatives aimed at improving student motivation were well represented in the overall programme; some issues were relatively neglected. The needs of slow learners and mentally handicapped young people were included only after an existing scheme in Wales was invited to join the programme some time after it began. No project dealt specifically with the needs of girls, though many listed this issue as a secondary objective of their plans. A survey at the end of the programme found, however, that few succeeded in keeping the girls/equal opportunity issue on the agenda.⁶

The experiences of several projects in the United Kingdom are drawn upon in this volume. The programme was unique in including English, Scottish and Welsh projects.

The Industrial Training Units for post-school slow learners in Mid-Glamorgan predated the EEC initiative but were evaluated as part of that programme. Particular attention was focused by the evaluators

on the inter-relationships of agencies dealing with these young people, as well as on the Units themselves.

The Sheffield project was mainly concerned with schools-based curriculum development emphasizing the increased use and coordination of external agencies. Both curriculum content and the processes of change were evaluated.

The project in the Inner London Education Authority was an integrated course between schools and colleges of further education, designed to provide a more relevant programme for disenchanted, underachieving pupils in their final year of school.

The Scottish project, in Clydebank, was mainly schools-based but included links with further education, with the target population less able pupils in their final year.

The authors of the papers in this collection were all directly involved with the evaluation of and/or action in the EEC projects. The volume is presented as a partial step towards disseminating some of the ideas and experiences which have come out of the programme.

Notes

- 1 GORMLEY, R. and WALLIS-JONES, M. (1972) 'First jobs', *New Society* 20 July, pp. 133-4.
- 2 Speaking to a Conservative Party education conference. Quoted in *The Times Education Supplement* (TES), 27 June 1980.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 22 October 1976.
- 4 *Aspects of Secondary Education in England: A Survey by HM Inspectors of Schools* (1979) London, HMSO.
- 5 A second was the excellent Schools Council Industry Project which combined a central directorate and evaluation structure with development concentrated in local education authorities.
- 6 See REES, T. and VARLAAM, C. (1983) 'The experience of girls in the EC Pilot Projects on the Transition from School to Working Life; Cologne, IFAPLAN.

1 *Preparation for Life: Curriculum Issues*

Brian Wilcox and Sue Lavercombe

One of the recurring themes of the educational debate of the last few years has been the insistence that a fundamental aim of schools, and secondary schools in particular, is the preparation of their pupils for all aspects of adult life.¹ A major preoccupation has been with ways of adapting the last two years of compulsory education so as to facilitate the transition to working life of those pupils who leave school at the earliest opportunity — especially those with poor academic attainments and little commitment to the values and demands of schools. This has led to an increased recognition of the need for more systematic careers education, enhanced programmes of work experience, and generally the establishment of better links between schools and the world of work.

As the youth unemployment situation has worsened, however, both teachers and pupils have come to the uncomfortable realization that the ‘career promises’ of schools have an increasingly hollow ring. Careers teachers, perhaps more than their colleagues in other departments, have experienced the trauma of having one of the basic purposes of schools rendered problematic as a result of major structural changes in the economy. One response to this situation has been a switch of emphasis to preparing pupils for unemployment and enforced leisure and to the acquisition of ‘coping’ and ‘survival’ skills.

In the face of such challenges many schools have restructured their fourth and fifth year curricula both in organizational and content terms. One manifestation of this restructuring has been the trend to increase the amount of time devoted in the core curriculum to such elements as careers education, health education and social education. These have often been integrated together in varying degrees under such titles as ‘design for living’, ‘essential studies’, ‘life skills’. In the absence of a commonly agreed designation, we apply the generic name ‘preparation for life’ (or PFL) to such courses.