
Lost in transition? A comparison of early 'drop out' from education and training in England and France

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Early drop out from education and training

Concern about early drop out from education and training is evident in many nations worldwide. In rich industrialised countries, such as France and England, debate is often associated with issues to do with citizenship, the reduction in the availability of unskilled work and the perceived risk of social exclusion for those who drop out of education and training. As it has become less and less common for young people in such countries to get full-time employment at the age of 16, youth transitions have become more protracted. Ending education and training at 16 can now be seen as a form of early drop out. Not staying in education or training beyond the age of 16 will, in some cases, follow a longer period of disengagement with and poor attendance in compulsory schooling. Early drop out and lack of qualifications and training is strongly associated with unemployment.

Getting 'lost in transition' from school, through to further education or training and on to work is part of the wider debate about social exclusion in Europe:

To have a job means adult status, self-respect, money, independence and the opportunity to broaden one's social contacts. Young people who are cut off from work are losing a vital chance to get new perspectives and to integrate into wider society (European Commission, 2002, p.49).

Being employed and contributing to society is the goal of most political and policy debate about early drop out in both England and France, as are concerns about acquiring particular standards in terms of qualifications. This debate is further underpinned by a myriad of concerns that range from the desire to reduce early parenthood, drug misuse, criminal and anti-

social behaviour. The associations between these issues and early drop out from education and training have helped to foster a belief that reducing this early drop out can contribute to the reduction of these problems too.

'Without qualifications' or 'NEET'

The English use of acronyms and monitoring systems is immediately apparent when trying to identify and compare information about early drop out with that available from the French system. The current English concept is 'NEET', that is Not in Employment, Education or Training after the end of compulsory education (age 16). In France the groups that would be included in the 'NEET' population in England are not put together as a single group. The focus in France is on young people who are 'without qualifications', particularly those traditional academic qualifications associated with the end of compulsory schooling at age 16. The status of being 'without qualifications' is defined by the French Ministry of Education as those young people who leave school early without qualifications (at least a year before the end of compulsory schooling) or without taking or passing their examinations. Interestingly, young people who leave school without qualifications but find an apprenticeship or some form of training are still considered to be 'without qualifications' in France, illustrating the ideal of formal academic standards for all (the Brevet de Colleges).

The concept of 'NEET' is wider and the groups included are more varied. 'NEETs' have been variously characterised by researchers as: young people in a temporary transitional phase (including people between courses or employment, travelling and gap year students and so on); those who have made a conscious decision to be NEET (including those looking after young children or other relatives); and a more problematic group who have complex circumstances and needs (including homeless

and looked after young people, young offenders and those with mental health and substance misuse problems) (Yates and Payne, 2006). It is obvious that these diverse groups have different needs for support and provision and it may not be either possible, or desirable, for all of them to be in employment, education or training. Yates and Payne (2008) argue that the diversity of groups that make up the NEET population has been lost. One reason for this is that the concept is so often used to summarise a series of negative situations and connotations associated with disadvantage, as well as low levels of aspiration and motivation. In contrast, 'without qualifications' is a description of the situation of a group of young people in France, many of whom would be 'NEET' post 16, using the English concept. However, the difficulties in direct comparison between these groups should be noted. For example, 'without qualifications' does not necessarily include some of those regarded as 'NEET' in England; such as young people in a temporary transitional phase and young carers (all of whom may or may not have formal qualifications). Further, those in France who are in apprenticeships and training post 16 would not be considered 'NEET' in England.

Participation and achievement in England and France

Meaningful comparative data is notoriously difficult to obtain. It is often in the meaning and detail of how data is collected, categorised and made available (or not) that some real insights into other countries and cultures are possible. The pass/fail nature of the French school system means that youth transitions can be very circumscribed at an early age. In England there is a great deal of 'fine tuning' in terms of numbers and grades of exam results at age 16, with an emphasis on trying to ensure that the great majority leave with some qualifications. In general there is more monitoring data available at the national level in England in comparison with France. For example, authorised absence or

Participation and achievement in compulsory education in England and France (to age 16) in 2006/2007

Indicator	England (% of the school population)	France (% of the school population)
Leaving qualifications (typically at age 16)	GCSE or equivalent: 5 A*-C 62% Any passes 97.3% No passes 2.7%	Brevet des colleges Pass: 79% Fail or exam not taken: 21%
Pupil absence rate	Authorised: 6.5% Not-authorized: 1% (as a proportion of all possible school registrations nationally)	Authorised: not available nationally Not authorised: 6.5% (4 half days or more a month in secondary schools)
Exclusion from school	Permanent: 0.12% Fixed period: 5.6%	Not available nationally
'NEET' or 'No qualifications'	Around 10% 'NEET'	Around 8% 'no qualifications'

England statistics see: <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/rsgateway/>

France statistics see: <http://www.education.gouv.fr>

exclusion from school is not available at the national level in France, although both issues are recognised to be a problem and local data and evidence from research helps to monitor these issues (Blaya, 2008). In terms of the concerns of this paper it would seem that there is a significant minority (8-10%) of young people in England and France who do not have the qualifications or wherewithal needed to obtain further education, training or work after leaving compulsory schooling. In both countries this situation is disproportionately associated with existing social disadvantage and specific ethnic groups (Felouzis, Liot and Perroton, 2005; DfES, 2006). It should be noted that there is no national monitoring data of ethnicity in France, as this is against the law. In contrast, monitoring by ethnicity is a requirement in England.

Policy response

A range of initiatives in France and England have for some time focussed on the young people who are the subject of this paper. In France there is a strong focus on individualised coaching (such as the TRACE programme, since 1998), curricula and training (ie, the *Nouvelles Chances* programme, 1999). The *Nouvelles Chances* programme is offered to 18-30 year olds. A Junior Apprenticeship programme was started in 2006. Junior Apprenticeships are available to 14 and 15 year olds, with a focus on narrowing the gap between education and industry, motivating young people and getting them into the labour market early. This focus on special programmes and initiatives is equally apparent in England. In particular the emphasis is on more individualised learning and options, changing curricula and the planned expansion of apprenticeships. Furthermore, diplomas for 14-19 year olds will be introduced from September

2008, starting with five diplomas and increasing to 17 by 2011. The DCSF (2008, para 1) describes the diploma idea in the following way: *'The Diploma is the perfect way to explore your options. It's a new qualification for 14 to 19 year olds and offers a mix of classroom learning and hands-on experience – all designed to prepare you for wherever you want to go in life.'* A key difference in France is the complexity of administrative structures involved in programmes. Those who are 'lost in transition' may in part be in this situation due to the complexity of access to services (*mille feuilles effect*); with the Ministry of Education and local administrations of cities, regions, departments and municipalities all involved in addressing these issues. As well, in France there is a relative lack of research and monitoring on the effects of special programmes and initiatives (Debarbieux, 2008).

In England the 'Connexions' service typifies an individualised approach to young people in need of support. Connexions was piloted in selected areas in the late 1990s and then phased in nationwide from 2001. The service is in the process of being incorporated into Children's Departments at the time of writing. Connexions aims to be an integrated support service consisting of personal advisors from a number of agencies involved in addressing the needs of young people (Careers, Social, Youth and Probation services) as part of the same service. Another approach is the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA), paid directly to young people, as an explicit attempt to encourage young people from low income households to stay on in education beyond the age of 16. EMAs were piloted in the late 1990s and have been available nationally since 2004. The payment of this allowance (£30 a week) is related to household income and reduces as that income rises to a ceiling of £30,000. Five bonus payments may also be paid to young people over a two year period (for good attendance and achievement). While both initiatives can claim

some successes, neither have really changed the ongoing proportion of young people who are NEET. For example, one evaluation of EMA pilots indicates that whilst EMAs increased post-16 education participation, they did not attract people already in the NEET group (Maguire and Rennison, 2008).

It could be argued that following a period of support and inducement of young people to participate in education and training post 16, England is now moving towards a period of enforcement. Current proposals in England will increase the age at which young people can leave education and training to 17 then 18 years, with a requirement to participate. This requirement to participate will be enforced by an Attendance Order if a young person who drops out of education or training does not take up other offers. A breach of this order may be civil or criminal (DCSE, 2007). Meanwhile in France, the main focus is to provide young people with the basic education and training so that nobody is left behind (*Ne laisser personne au bord du chemin*). Enforcement is not a feature of the approach to young people over 16. Instead, the emphasis is on offering more individual training schemes and wider partnerships with communities and businesses with the aim of better preparing young people for their future integration into society and the world of work (*Ministère de l'Education*, 2005).

Comparing explanation and debate

In England as in France the official discourse focuses on raising expectations and participation; reducing social exclusion; education, training and employment as a solution to various social ills – including anti-social behaviour and criminal behaviour, international competition and a changing world and so on. Work is seen as the way out of poverty, so that young parenthood, illness or disability become issues that require specific support or initiatives to enable people to participate

through education, training or employment (see DCSE, 2007; *Journal Officiel* 31st of March 2006, law n° 2006-396).

In both countries there is a strong emphasis on raising the level of achievement and qualifications for all. There have been improvements in the proportion of young people passing exams at age 16, as well as increased participation in higher education in recent decades. However, despite these improvements there is scepticism in popular discourse about their value; both in terms of quality issues (the qualifications themselves), as well as in relation to whether they translate into access to employment commensurate with the qualifications gained. There is a strong relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and educational disadvantage. In the two countries, problems manifest themselves somewhat differently. In France social unrest and riots (as in 2005) have been apparent in the *banlieue* (literally 'the suburbs, often used to refer to areas of social housing). In England the concept of 'anti-social behaviour' has been more broadly associated with concerns about the behaviour of young people in general, particularly in relation to their behaviour in public space, although there is also a clear association and concentration of these concerns in relation to areas of social housing and relative deprivation. Taken together these issues have increasingly helped to highlight those young people who are not participating and achieving in education, training and employment as a social, as much as an educational, problem. These associations have helped to pathologize some young people and have defined them by what they are not or, indeed, by the type of qualifications they do not have.

Research evidence on the issue varies by discipline. Educationalists in England tend to focus very much on curriculum, teaching and learning issues and providing appropriate routes and options for all young people (DCSE, 2007).

The latest Education Act in France (*Ministère de l'Éducation*, 2005) puts the emphasis on grammar and literacy and vocational courses or apprenticeships for those who are not considered to be academic (*Ministère de l'Éducation*, 2006). The focus in France is on young people's motivation and responsibility as learners, as well as teachers' skills and authority. Ongoing concern about unauthorised absence and exclusion continues in both England and France, with a great deal of monitoring data and research being available in England but with a lack of available national data in France. Among criminologists there is a great deal of debate about the importance of education and training within the risk factors paradigm in England, a perspective that is not so popular in France. Other social research in both France and England focuses more on structural issues such as increasing inequality. Individual agency is debated in both countries, particularly in relation to the extent to which young people often seen as 'disaffected' actually share mainstream norms and values but live in socio-economic circumstances that make it very difficult to escape their situation. Debates about the increasing gap in social skills ('soft skills') and broader concerns about childhood and the family in England are also in evidence.

In England, there is growing emphasis on providing different 'routes' into adulthood through education and training. There is more flexibility in the system. However, for the less motivated it is still hard to find your way through the maze of different qualifications, despite a dedicated service called 'Connexions'. In France, despite the whole spate of measures and services that have been offered to children or families, the complexity of access makes it very difficult to understand and benefit from them. Moreover, all these measures and specifically the apprenticeships have been difficult to implement despite financial incentives from the State. Problems in relationships and links with schools are part of the problem. Moreover, many

companies do not want to be part of the training of some young people, largely due to issues of behaviour and social skills. In other words, the neediest young people in both England and France have not been reached successfully by existing initiatives.

Conclusions

It is argued that the social control function of education and training is becoming increasingly explicit in both countries. Education and training can be viewed as a form of custody for young people, with enforced participation post 16 planned in the near future in England. Compulsory education for this age group is not currently planned in France, although secondary schools are legally supposed to be under an obligation to follow up and offer help (including the chance to go back and repeat a year) to any child who leaves school without qualifications.

England and France share much in common in terms of the social patterning of which young people are likely to become 'lost in transition', with social class and ethnicity remaining powerful predictors. Responses to the problem are similar, as in the growth of individualised support and plans to increase apprenticeships. However, France still places more emphasis on 'insertion' into the mainstream of ideas, rather than choice and different pathways and routes, as in England. There are powerful political and social incentives to address the needs of these young people, whatever the political stance taken. Let's hope these incentives mean that those 'lost in transition' will reduce, in a way that respects individual choice, through the various initiatives both ongoing and being planned in France and England.

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