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YOUTH LABOUR MARKETS IN POST-1984 NEW ZEALAND: YOUNG PEOPLE NEGOTIATING SCHOOL TO WORK TRANSITIONS¹

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger project exploring the school to post-school transition choices of New Zealand's first post-1984 generation. In this paper we analyse census data relating to the employment of young people (aged 15-24 years) in two of the project's sites, Southland and Auckland. We then discuss our participants' perceptions of the labour market and find that these perceptions are broadly in line with general labour market trends, and that they incorporate a reasonable sense of the local opportunities for part time employment while at school. But participants lacked this 'local literacy' when considering future employment possibilities. That is, they lack a clear sense of engagement with 'place' in relation to their imagined working futures.

Introduction

In a 2005 article on youth transition in local labour markets, Morrison and Loeber examined the employment aspirations of young people in contrasting locations: Kawerau, a small rural town with a poorly performing local labour market, and Porirua, an urban centre with a much stronger labour market (Morrison and Loeber, 2005). They found that, contrary to the generalisations often made in the literature (that young people from rural areas and small towns have low labour market expectations) participants who lived in Kawerau had higher expectations of themselves and their possible futures than local labour market conditions could possibly justify, while the expectations of their counterparts in the comparison school in Porirua were more in keeping with the opportunities in that labour market. One of the conclusions that Morrison and Loeber drew from this is that rural students "expectations are framed not by the specifics of the local labour market but by the opportunities perceived to lie beyond the town" (Morrison and Loeber, 2005: 78). For urban students on the other hand, expectations "are based on the perceived opportunities in their local metropolitan labour market" (ibid.). This leads Morrison and Loeber (ibid: 80) to suggest that "the paths linking place to youth expectations may be more complex than have been framed to date". This paper is an attempt to engage further with this question by examining the changing structure of two regional labour markets and considering how young

people in transition in these regions perceive these local labour markets.

The research from which this paper is drawn is a Marsden funded project entitled '*In transition: how the children of the economic reforms articulate identities at the child adult border*'. For the purposes of this paper, we are drawing on data from two of the project's sites: Southland and Auckland. In these two sites, sixty-six young people were interviewed in their final year of school and again twelve to eighteen months later. The project's aim has been to explore how these young people born immediately after 1984 negotiate transition(s) from school to post-school worlds.

The data from Southland and Auckland provide an opportunity to examine further what Morrison and Loeber (and others, see for example, Bettis 1996, Gabriel 2002, Jamieson 2000, McDowell 2002, Panelli 2002, Phillips 2002, Shucksmith 2004, Smith *et al.* 2002, Steedman 2004, Stockdale 2004) have identified as a significant question for our understanding of youth transitions: namely, how does *place* (and one's local labour market, in particular) feature in youth transitions from school to work, and in young people's management of those transitions?

To look at this question we employ two sets of data:

1) labour market data (drawn from the Census) that

identify trends in the Southland and Auckland regional labour markets over time (adjusted for the change in the classification of occupations that took place in 1991).

2) qualitative data from in-depth interviews, including discussion about participants' current and planned labour market participation.

We begin by looking at a general picture of the changing structure of the regional labour markets in Southland and Auckland. We then explore whether knowledge about these local labour market contexts has informed the ways in which participants see themselves negotiating transition generally, and the labour market in particular.

Regional Labour Markets: Southland and Auckland

Work Status

Perhaps the most dramatic feature of the period 1986 - 2001 has been the decline of the full time youth labour market in both regions. The raising of the school leaving age in the early 1990s clearly had a lot to do with this for the younger cohort (15-19 years) but even in the older youth cohort (20-24 years), involvement in full time work declined significantly both in absolute terms and in the proportion of each age group employed full time.

The youth population in Auckland rose over this period by about 5 per cent, but fell significantly in Southland, by increasing margins for each age cohort over time: by 27 per cent for 15-16 year olds, 30 per cent for 17 - 19 years olds, 46 per cent for 20-22 year olds and by 48 per cent for the 23-24 years cohort. Tracing each cohort through the period in question indicates that significant out-migration is taking place in this region.

Excluding 15-16 year olds because of the raised school leaving age, we find that for young men aged 17-19 years in both Auckland and Southland, numbers in full time work in 2001 were less than half of what they were in 1986. A similar pattern is apparent for young women in the 17-19 years age group: numbers employed full time are down by two thirds in Auckland and three quarters in Southland. The distribution of these cohorts across various work status categories shows a strong reorientation towards part time work and non-participation in the labour force, although this shift is more marked in Auckland than in Southland.

In the 20-22 years age group, the shape of the labour market for young men in Southland remained strongly focused on full time work throughout the period in question, less so for young women living there. Numbers in this cohort employed in full time work have fallen significantly, however, declining by more than one half for both males and females. In Auckland for this age group the absolute decline in full time work for young men is one third and for young women, one quarter.

Deindustrialisation

Over the period 1986-2001, the Southland labour market, not surprisingly, maintained a strong focus on agriculture, fisheries, forestry and manufacturing associated with these industries. This labour market has, to a certain extent, resisted the deindustrialisation trend that has marked other, particularly urban, labour markets in New Zealand over the last twenty years. For example, an occupational break-down of the Southland region in 1986 indicates that 68 per cent of (all-age) men employed full time were located in manufacturing, trades and labouring work. By 2001 this had declined, but only to 64 per cent. This can be compared with the Auckland labour market where the corresponding figures are 49 per cent in 1986 and 35 per cent in 2001. For women, the deindustrialisation trend is correspondingly small in Southland (from 30 to 25 per cent in manufacturing, trades and labouring), and more significant in Auckland (from 22 to 10 per cent).

Southland has witnessed a degree of increased involvement by full time employed men and women in occupations associated with management and with professional and associate professional work: this growth has been marginal for men, (from 21 to 23 per cent of all full time employed men) and more significant for women (from 29 to 35 per cent). In Auckland, this change has been much more marked: from 32 per cent to 45 per cent for men, and from 34 per cent to 49 per cent for women.

The data indicate the declining involvement of full time workers in sales and service work in both labour markets: in Auckland, from 18 to 14 per cent for men, and from 43 to 37 per cent for women, and in Southland from 11 to 8 per cent for men and from 41 to 34 per cent for women. This trend points to the increasingly part time nature of sales and service work over this period.

Turning to the part time labour force, we see again the declining involvement in manufacturing, trades and labouring work in both labour markets, and growing involvement in sales and service work.

In the youth labour market, young men in Southland employed in full time work are heavily concentrated in manufacturing, trades and labouring occupations: around 80 percent over the whole period for the 15-19 year olds and around 75 percent for the 20-24 year olds. These figures have been relatively stable over time. In Auckland on the other hand, by 2001, 54 percent of 15-19 year old males in full time work were employed in manufacturing, trades and labouring work, down from 71 per cent in 1986, and for those aged 20-24 years the corresponding figures are 40 per cent in 2001, down from 59 per cent in 1986. The occupational redistribution consequent upon this deindustrialisation in Auckland is evident in the rising proportion of young men in both sales and service work and in professional and associate professional work.

For young women, deindustrialisation has again been clear in Auckland, with participation in manufacturing, trades and labouring occupations declining for full time workers by more than half for both 15-19 year olds and

20-24 year olds (for the former, from 23 per cent to 10 per cent, and for the latter from 14 per cent to 5 per cent). For the 20-24 years group, this occupational redistribution has not taken the form of rising involvement in sales and service work but rather of increased participation in professional and associate professional work. For young Southland women, on the other hand, deindustrialisation is much less obvious, in fact there has been a slight increase in the proportion of full time employed young women involved in manufacturing, trades and labouring work. There has been a decline in full time involvement in sales and service work, and for the older age group a rising proportion involved in professional and associate professional work.

In part time work in both labour markets and across both youth age cohorts, there has been a reasonably clear upward trend in sales and service work and a decline in manufacturing, trades and labouring work.

The trends identified in the data are not at all surprising given the changes that have taken place in the New Zealand economy over the last twenty years. The question is, how do young people make sense of this context (if indeed they try to at all) and how does this understanding inform their own negotiation with the labour market in the transition years?

In the discussion that follows four themes emerge that suggest that our participants have a general but vague grasp of the trends that have just been outlined.

1) There was a strong perception among most participants, both in Southland and in Auckland, that there is a youth labour market of 'after school' jobs in which they all participate to a greater or lesser extent. In their talk, it is clear however, that this bears very little relation to the future labour market that they envisaged engaging with as adult workers. The data suggest some justification for this perception. The occupational distribution for part time workers aged 15-19 years in both regions is very strongly concentrated in sales and service occupations. The occupational distribution for adult full time workers is quite different, as might be expected, showing strong involvement in managerial, professional and associate professional work for women in both regions and for men in Auckland, while for men in Southland the distribution is clearly towards manufacturing and trades occupations.

2) In terms of work as adults, there is a strong preference among many (although not all) participants for work in managerial, professional and associate professional occupations in this future labour market. Again, it is clear why this might be so, both in the data (as noted above), and in the strong messages about the 'knowledge economy' voiced by parents, teachers and politicians (see Higgins and Nairn 2006).

3) As just mentioned, participants saw little or no connection between these two labour markets. What they did see, very clearly and almost universally, was that their

passport into this labour market of the future is a tertiary qualification of some kind.

4) In terms of locality, the local youth labour market of after school jobs, was spoken of as highly specific, strongly located (particularly in Southland) and was well known to them. The future, adult labour market was not specifically located at all – for Southland young people it was generally perceived to be somewhere other than Southland; for the Auckland young people, it was nowhere specific at all.

Future Plans

Southland Participants

The thirty eight Southland participants in this project come from a range of class backgrounds (according to parental occupation); they are mainly Pakeha, and their last year of school varied from Year 11 to Year 13. About half lived in a small provincial town, which we call Southtown, others lived on farms or farmlets, and in other towns in Southland.

Almost all our Southland participants had had some connection with the labour market by their last year of school (after-school work, holiday work, weekend work, casual work and in three cases, a business venture of their own). This work was in retail, personal and community services and farm work. The three business ventures were in forestry, livestock and selling t-shirts. Very few of these young people made a connection between this work and work in their imagined futures: for the most part, they saw these as separate phases in their lives involving two quite different labour markets. Their paid work while at school was a way to make money, usually for spending, but in some (few) cases for saving towards tertiary education or travel. It was not generally regarded as a way to gain skills for the future or to develop labour market networks in the community that might help them find work once they had left school, although often they had used local networks to get this work in the first place. These were jobs that were seen as easily picked up and put down, and often were.

The distinction between these jobs and 'real' jobs in the future was well put by one of the young women who had failed to get into university and was working instead as an assistant manager in a local retail outlet:

"If the sales reps and people that think I am doing well ... you know they probably wouldn't think so highly of me, if they realised it was just an after school job and I just stayed there" (Laura).

Laura recognised that starting at the bottom, as she has done, used to be a way to get ahead: "some of the older [workers], they probably just worked their way up" but she was very clear that the younger workers have degrees in marketing and/or management and that she must do the same in order to get what she regards as a proper job. This was seen as the key for many for entry into a

different kind of labour market than the one they had participated in while at school. This alternative labour market was to be accessed through post-school qualifications and was located, in many cases, elsewhere than Southtown. The 'where' of this elsewhere was, however, generally unclear. As was the 'what' of what they were going to do once they got there.

So, these young people were aware of the types of jobs that were 'on the doorstep' and many did not think too highly of these:

"It's like a country town so there's always car jobs and farming jobs and stuff all round the district so the guys see it as their way out of school ... [and] some girls leave and work in dairies and [shops] ... [but] most of them know that they want to go to university" (Louise).

Some of the boys did leave school with the plan of working locally, in the meat works, on farms, in forestry/horticulture, driving trucks, fixing cars. And some of the girls did go into retail work. None of these girls had planned to do this however; all of them had some further education in mind when we talked with them in their last year of school.

The boys who planned to work locally were an exception. For them there was no great distinction between the kind of local work (on farms, in the freezing works, in forestry and horticulture) that was available in the holidays or after school, and the kind of work that they expected for themselves after leaving school. Their access to this labour market was by traditional means, through local knowledge and local networks, rather than by means of some form of tertiary education or training. But this was a small group. Only five of the thirty-eight participants planned to go directly into the workforce from school, and only one of those had no intention of undertaking any form of new qualification. Of the remaining thirty three, eighteen were considering university as a possible post-school destination (grades allowing). In total, twenty eight of them had long term plans/dreams to work in some form of managerial, professional or semi-professional occupation. Eight of the remaining ten were looking at courses in tertiary institutions other than university.

In the event, twelve of them did get to university in their first post-school year. Others went to polytechnic, Teachers' College, the armed forces, paid work and back to school. Two were unemployed or on ACC.

These young people's working futures were almost universally seen through the lens of tertiary education/training in some form. And through this lens most of them saw a quite different labour market opening out for them than the one they had experienced while at school.

This was also true of our Auckland participants but for the Southland young people these two imagined labour markets were often distinguished by locality, that is by

the very specific and concretely known 'here' of Southtown, and the much more general and imagined 'elsewhere' of their future employment.

For most of our rural participants then, Morrison and Loeber's conclusion, that young rural people base their employment expectations on opportunities that they perceive to lie outside town, does hold. We are able to unpack these perceptions in our participants' talk in terms of at least three main threads.

1) The desire to leave Southtown

For example, Matt spoke of his motivation to complete his school qualifications saying it was "just to get out of Southtown really... it was like my ticket to leave".

Carolyn spoke of some male school friends who, after leaving school, were still in Southtown "working at the freezing works, driving around in cars". When asked if she thought they planned to stay in Southtown she replied, "I hope not. They can do way better than that. Some of them got [university entrance qualifications] and I mean they're in Southtown!"

Even the one person, Mike, who refused to contemplate a post-school qualification of any kind had saved money to get out by working in the meat works: "As soon as I got my money I got a plane ticket and left because I was getting sick of the town.... You know, it's a little country and it has a little town". He found work in the North Island, and told a mate still in Southland, "there's a job up here, and you should get out of there and do things and, you know, get a life".

2) The desire to get a good/wanted job.

"Good" jobs were generally perceived by these young people as requiring a tertiary qualification (see Higgins and Nairn 2006), which in turn required them to leave town in order to attend a tertiary institution.

Laura is typical of those of our participants who hoped to go to university in saying, "I would like to go to University, like I do want to further myself and have a good job that I can be proud of and I know I am probably going to need a degree to do that."

3) The idea that a good/wanted job is only possible elsewhere.

Few of our participants spoke of their working futures as located in Southtown, or in Southland. Those that did stay were often unhappy about it (like Laura), or chose to stay, aware that they were going 'against the flow'. Murray, for example, went to university but returned for a job back home not because he had failed at university, but because he had worked out that what he wanted to do was back home (working in a hospice). He observed that he would be "one of the few people working in Southtown because all my friends are actually in Dunedin or working somewhere else now".

Carolyn went to work on a farm. She has long term plans to be a photographer in the airforce, but in the meantime, she chose to stay and observed how few of her contemporaries made that choice:

"... anything that gets your hands dirty and requires a lot of physical effort there is not really a huge amount of people wanting to go into it because everyone is driving them towards uni and office work and all of that sort of thing".

So, these young people had an idea about the local labour market in terms of the kinds of jobs that awaited them if they stayed, and from their talk it seems that it was the staying as much as the kind of job that mattered to them. At least, these things were closely tied together in their minds.

Auckland Participants

The twenty eight Auckland participants are mainly young Maori and Pacific people in Years 12 and 13 at school: they come from reasonably diverse class backgrounds and live in a range of suburbs across Auckland.

These young people also had a sense of operating in two labour markets, but not such a strong sense of locality as the Southlanders. Like the Southland young people they moved in and out of part time work, in retail, hospitality and childcare, while they were at school and they often gained this work through their networks of friends and family. Interestingly, they were less likely than their Southland counterparts to be involved in part time employment on a sustained basis while in their final year at school and often mentioned that this was because their parents disapproved of them being in paid work, either because they were expected to help with family responsibilities or because they were expected to concentrate on their school work so that they would do well (cf. Nash 2000).

Like our Southland participants, most of these young people intended to head for a range of tertiary education destinations including university, polytechnics, Teachers College, as well as the armed forces and the police. Unlike our Southland participants, however, they did not have a strong sense of their local labour market. The jobs that they imagined themselves doing in the future could have been anywhere – nationally, or globally. Some of them talked about going overseas to work, but mainly in the sense of wanting to travel, and only occasionally because the job might not be easily done in New Zealand. In fact there was very little in their talk about location at all, except in terms of where those intending to pursue tertiary education or training might study. Like the Southland young people, this group was strongly exercised about what kind of tertiary study they would do, but many of them had not thought much beyond that:

"I have only thought as far as to what sort of qualifications I want to get. Thinking of what I want to be, I really want to do something like using my business skills and

managing skills either to create my own business or create a business in which the programme is to help others" (Carmen).

"There's so many things I can do ... like I definitely do want to get that degree, or a degree of some sort but you know ... I don't have enough experience to really say, this is what I want to be doing" (Mahina).

For many, as among the Southlanders, the degree was seen as allowing them to "find a really good job that offers a lot of money and a job that will make me want to work every single day..." (Ngairé).

Perhaps this lack of 'local literacy' among the Aucklanders can be attributed, as Morrison and Loeber suggest, to urban students' expectations being based on the opportunities that they perceive to exist in their local labour market. That particular labour market has been fairly buoyant over the last few years. It may be that the ease with which after-school jobs are picked up and put down has led to a belief that the imagined labour market of post-tertiary experience will behave in similar ways. Certainly, when we asked these young people if they thought it would be easy to find a job (or not) once they had completed tertiary study they replied (like their Southland counterparts) that the only barriers to getting their desired jobs would be their own lack of ability or lack of hard work. In general, their horizons regarding employment were broad and non-specific; locality simply did not feature.

Discussion and Future Research Paths

Analytically there are two directions in which this discussion might proceed. One would explore issues of identity and locality, looking at place in ways considered by Appadurai (1990) and Wiborg (2004: 418) as both "a specific and material geographical location, framing people's lives" and as "a cultural construction which is shaped and maintained through social relations and within people's minds". This would explore the ways in which the local labour market itself is inscribed with the characteristics of place and how this affects young people's engagement with it.

A second direction, perhaps more policy relevant, would be to consider these data in terms of the issue of education-employment linkage and perhaps the importance (or not) of what we have termed here 'local literacy' – knowledge of the local labour market.

These young people's perceptions of the local labour market were, in a very general sense, accurate in so far as they perceived:

- 1) differences between the after school labour market and the adult labour market;
- 2) the rise in managerial, professional and associate professional work, particularly in Auckland: thus opting

for tertiary qualifications that might facilitate this kind of work is a rational option.

3) the slower deindustrialisation in Southland than elsewhere (Auckland, for example): if the Southland young people are not looking for work in manufacturing, trades and labouring then leaving Southland is also a rational option.

Clearly, however, these young people saw their future employment almost universally as a fairly distant event in a labour market that was perceived through a lens of tertiary study of some kind. Quite often this was a very thick lens – sometimes so thick that they could only see the study and not what might lie beyond it, as the extracts above from Carmen and Mahina suggest.

Sometimes that lens was a kaleidoscope. Danielle, who thought she might like to own her own law firm one day, or become a politician said:

"I am looking at ... Business and Administration. Or a BA... If I go to Auckland [University] it's either Law or Commerce. And then I was thinking and/or psychology. Instead of Business [or] Law.... I really want to do Human Resources. So I don't know why I am doing all this other stuff. But that's one of the things I would like to be. Just Human Resources. I think I would be a good Human Resources person."

And, Michelle, from Southland:

"I want to go to P.E. school, and do teaching ... and do my nutrition degree and my psychology degree so I've got all these things to choose from. ... I don't know. I couldn't say specifically [what I'll do for a job]. I should, like, create my own one. I want to do - like work with people and I love working with sports and yeah, nutrition. I don't know, it's hard to say. We'll just see what happens."

It seems possible that vagueness about intending careers and vagueness about place may be connected. There are many reasons why these young people might be vague about what they want to do. These have to do with a range of issues including the fragmentation of the labour market, the reach of the global labour market, individualisation and issues of choice, and the power of the dominant transition rhetorics concerning the knowledge economy and the cultural economy (see Higgins and Nairn 2006, Nairn and Higgins 2007)

The question posed by this paper is: does vagueness about place matter? Does it matter that what young people may see through the tertiary education lens is often not located anywhere in particular? And would a more informed 'local literacy' help them to make better education-employment linkages? That making effective education-employment linkages may be a problem for many young

New Zealanders is indicated by the work of the Labour Market Dynamics group who report that among respondents to their survey of people between the ages of 15 and 34 years, of those currently in work, 43 per cent (and 46 per cent of Maori respondents within this group) reported that their current job was "not related at all" or "not very closely related" to their qualification. Dupuis, Inkson and McLaren (2005: 50) suggest that "this finding demonstrates the general, non-vocational nature of many educational qualifications". That may be so, but our data suggest that another of the reasons for this might be the scatter-gun approach that many young people are taking to tertiary education. Certainly, if we think of career development in terms of bridging the gap between talent and opportunity, in which young people with certain talents and skills seek opportunities from employers who need those talents and skills (Jarvis, 2006), then the young people in our study had thought a good deal about the former, and knew almost nothing at all about the latter. It is in bridging that gap that local literacy might be useful.

Note

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