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# **School-to-work transitions support: ‘cruel optimism’ for young people in ‘the state of insecurity’**

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## **Abstract**

In this paper I argue that current arrangements for school-to-work transitions support in England, now school-based, are designed to contribute towards ensuring the consent of the population for what I refer to as the ‘state of insecurity’ (Lorey, 2015): the neoliberal relationship between the individual and the state in which insecurity is promoted as freedom. Based on an analysis of policy, the paper argues that the government careers strategy for young people aims to contribute to shaping the precarious subjects which inhabit the state of insecurity, by encouraging them to internalise neoliberal values around freedom and individualism which accompany governmental precarisation. Drawing also on the work of Judith Butler (2011), I suggest that throughout the careers strategy, neoliberalism functions as performative or hegemonic norm which is cited to constitute notions of ‘good’ or ‘normal’ labour market arrangements, aspirations and selves. I suggest that this strategy is an example of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011), which constitutes a fantasy of a ‘good life’ which is in fact likely to be unattainable to many young people, especially the more disadvantaged.

## **Keywords**

school-to-work transitions support; careers strategy; policy analysis; ‘state of insecurity’, precarity; ‘cruel optimism’; fantasy of the ‘good life’.

## **Introduction: school to work transition services**

School-to-work transitions services support young people to make decisions about post-school education, training, work, careers and the labour market as they move through school towards a working life and futures beyond school. These services provide a variety of different kinds of support, such as advice, guidance, information, education, training, career management, careers learning, work experience and job training and preparation courses. The services not only take different forms in different parts of the world, they also change over time in response to shifting political, economic, social and cultural conditions. In England, there is a long history of what is referred to as career guidance. In 1948 a Youth Employment Service was created to work with schools. The Careers Service was formed in the 1970's, which created partnerships with schools. It was later privatised in the 1990's. The Connexions Service was created in 2001, a holistic youth support service which aimed to provide support to young people in a variety of areas, including career guidance, drug use, sexual health, housing and criminal justice. Since 2011, funding has been withdrawn from the Connexions Service, and the responsibility for school-to-work transitions support, including career guidance, has been handed to schools. Schools have not been given any extra funding to provide this service (besides some recent funding to train 'Careers Leaders', although see below for critique), although they are issued with guidelines from the government. Schools have since the end of the Second World War, always played a role in transitions support to a lesser or greater extent (Andrews and Hooley, 2017), but mostly in partnership with a discrete school-to-work transitions service.

Much recent work in the field of career guidance in England has focussed on how school-to-work transitions support can contribute to social justice and the reduction of social inequalities (Hooley et al 2018, 2019). Both the government itself, and scholars, have argued that career guidance has the potential to enhance social mobility (Department for Education [DfE], 2017, 2018; Hooley et al, 2014). Others however, would argue this is ultimately impossible. Many scholars have shown how education systems serve political and economic agendas to develop obedient, governable and consenting subjects for any given system (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Warmington, 2015). Indeed Warmington (2015) argues that ‘...education under capitalism cannot really be other than an agent of capitalist social and cultural reproduction.’ (p. 266). Equally scholars have argued that programmes which support young people with transitions from schooling to the labour market, including career guidance and job training programmes, contribute to producing and shaping consenting subjects for any given national economy and labour market (Ayers & Carlone, 2007; Chadderton and Colley, 2012; Colley, 2000; Irving, 2018).

In this paper, I analyse the new approach to school-to-work transition support in England as form of regulation and governance of the population. I argue firstly that government policy exemplifies state aims to normalise what I refer to as the ‘state of insecurity’ (Lorey, 2015): the neoliberal relationship between the individual and the state in which insecurity is promoted as freedom. The policy aims to contribute to shaping the precarious subjects which inhabit the state of insecurity, by encouraging them to internalise neoliberal values and subjectivities. Secondly, I suggest that this strategy is an example of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011), which constitutes a fantasy of a ‘good life’ which is likely to be unattainable to many young people,

especially the more disadvantaged, particularly if they follow current government policy.

The analysis in this paper takes a broadly poststructural approach but I also draw on scholars whose work might be regarded as somewhat more structural. I employ, for example, poststructuralist scholar Judith Butler's (2011) work on performativity to understand how the government's careers strategy functions as governing technology, which aims to shape norms and identities and thus regulate the population, work which builds on Foucault's work on governmentality. However I draw also on Bourdieu's (1998) work to identify the myths of neoliberalism, such as the promotion of insecurity as freedom. Bourdieu's work is regarded as having both structural and poststructural elements, although it could be argued that his work on neoliberalism is a broadly structural critique. I extend Bourdieu's work on myths by employing on Berlant's (2011) work on the fantasies of neoliberalism. Berlant, without explicitly mentioning Bourdieu, identifies similar neoliberal myths. However, taking a more poststructural approach, she conceptualises these myths as fantasies, exploring how desire and attachment for and to these fantasies is created among the population. In order to theorise the state of insecurity, I draw on Standing's (2011) and Lorey's (2015) work on neoliberal precarity. Standing takes a broadly structural approach and argues that neoliberal life has become so precarious for so many individuals that he identifies the development of a whole new class he calls the precariat. I employ Lorey's work on precarization as governing technology. Lorey takes a poststructural approach to understanding precarity, drawing on Foucault to argue that it is deliberately manufactured as a governing technique. Although Butler (e.g. 2004) also writes about precarity, her focus is around our shared precarity as humans as a form

of resistance to state sanctioned violence and othering. Whilst there are similarities between Butler's and Lorey's conceptualisation of precarity, in this paper I am interested in precarity and insecurity as a form of regulation.

### **Neoliberal precarity**

School to work transitions services aim to prepare young people for entry into the labour market. Since the 1970s, the UK labour market has been characterised by the market competitiveness, deregulation of financial services, flexibility, reduced labour costs, the expansion of semi-formal economies, the marketisation of public services, and reduced power of collectives such as trade unions (Bourdieu, 1998; Harvey, 2006; Standing, 2011): all key features of 'the new capitalism' (Sennet, 2006). Neoliberalism is the politics which underpins this current form of capitalism, and neoliberal policies promote economic competitiveness rather than welfare of citizens as the primary task of governments.

A key feature of neoliberal regimes has been the increase in insecurity and precarity in the lives of millions (Lorey, 2015; Standing, 2011). The traditional markers of security are becoming ever more rare or threatened: permanent, well-paid jobs, home-ownership, a public safety-net in the form of a welfare state. In the UK across much of the population, work and income insecurity is on the increase. In-work poverty, low pay, the use of zero-hours contracts and self-employment are all on the rise (Tinson, Aldridge and Whitham, 2015). Despite more young people going to university than ever before, the majority of workers remain in low paid, low skilled work. The number of graduates in insecure and low paid work is rising, suggesting that this trend is not confined to non-graduates. In addition, going to university

means acquiring debt, another marker of insecurity. Equally, the decline of manufacturing and heavy industry in many areas means that well-trodden transitions of previous generations into work in the local area and community are no longer the norm (Pimlott-Wilson, 2017), meaning that school-to-work transitions may be inevitably less secure for many young people, particularly in disadvantaged areas.

Poverty in the 16-40 age group is rising and is significantly more prevalent than before the 2007-8 financial crisis and related austerity measures (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2015). In 2015 it was reported that the number of households living in insecure rental conditions has doubled in 10 years. Research conducted by the New Policy Institute (Aldridge, 2015) suggests that as a nation, we are moving from ‘secure family homes to insecure rentals’. This is not just affecting the under 35s, a more traditionally precarious population group- in fact more than half of these households are headed by someone over 35. Equally, private renters are evenly distributed across the income distribution, so this insecurity is also being experienced by those in higher income groups, who would previously have been more likely to own their own homes. The welfare state provides less security than previously, as it becomes more difficult to access benefits, and the NHS is under threat.

Standing (2011) argues that millions of people can be understood as having entered ‘the precariat’, which he suggests may be an emerging class of people, including unemployed, working and middle class, whose lives are precarious, uncertain and unpredictable. This precarity pervades the public services as well as private businesses (Bourdieu, 1998). Insecurity is not equally distributed: young people, women and minorities have been hit disproportionately by the austerity measures and

cuts to social welfare benefits made since 2010 (e.g. Allen, 2016) and are more likely to experience in-work poverty, low paid work, zero-hours contracts and self-employment (Tinson, Aldridge and Whitham, 2015). However, ‘the precariat’ refers to all those whose working and living conditions have become increasingly unstable under neoliberalism and refers to an increasingly large proportion of the population. In this paper I am interested in how career guidance functions in this context of precarity and inequality and what its purpose is.

### **The ‘state of insecurity’: neoliberal precarisation as governing technology**

Neoliberalism functions by gaining consent from the population for its norms and values (Giroux and Giroux, 2009; Lorey, 2015). A key way this is done is by the peddling of myths around the benefits offered by the neoliberal system (Bourdieu, 1998). Bourdieu defines a myth as ‘a powerful discourse [...] an idea which has social force, which obtains belief.’ (p. 34). As examples he provides potent discourses which are nevertheless untrue: full employment or that everyone belongs to the middle class. Without referring to Bourdieu’s work, Berlant (2011) identifies what she refers to as neoliberal fantasies, such as meritocracy and social equality. Whilst Bourdieu and Berlant identify similar neoliberal myths and fantasies, Berlant’s work explores how neoliberal discourses create desire in the population for these fantasies, and individuals become attached to a given fantasy, which shapes their behaviour, whilst the circulation and internalisation of the myths is not Bourdieu’s concern. Fantasy, in Berlant’s 2011 work is defined as ‘the means by which people hoard idealising theories and tableaux about how they and the world “add up to something”’ (p.2). With particular relevance to school-to-work transitions into potentially precarious



work and lives is the neoliberal myth, and fantasy, of freedom and autonomy (e.g. Dean, 2002).

Under neoliberalism, insecurity is constituted as, and promoted as freedom. Indeed there has been a fundamental shift in the relationship between the state and the insecurity of the population: Under liberalism, freedom and insecurity were opposites, and freedom meant freedom from insecurity. Insecurity under neoliberalism is promoted as linked to notions of flexibility, individuality and liberation from more traditional modes of exploitation (Lorey, 2015; Vujanovic, 2016). Scholars argue that a key way in which neoliberal governmentality works is by nourishing the myth that we function independently and autonomously, and that this is liberating (Berlant 2011; Bourdieu, 1998; Lorey, 2015). Insecurity is not just a coincidental consequence of neoliberalism, rather is in fact a style of governance, a strategy for securing domination, and for ensuring that the population is generally on-message. Lorey (2015) and Bourdieu (1998) argue that we are living in a ‘state of insecurity’ characterised by what Lorey refers to as precarization, ‘living with the unforeseeable, with contingency’ (p.1). Under neoliberalism the institutions and systems of the state, such as the education system, actually contribute to the production of social insecurity themselves as a deliberate governing technique. Insecurity in patterns of living, learning and working is becoming normalised structurally. Populations in neoliberal regimes are taught to transform precarity into a virtue and use flexible space creatively, to work on the self: travelling, creating, resting (Allen, 2016).

‘[N]eoliberal governing proceeds primarily through social insecurity, through regulating the minimum of assurance while simultaneously increasing instability’ (Lorey, 2015:2).

In neoliberal regimes, individuals are encouraged to view themselves as autonomous, free to make their own lifestyle choices, responsible for their own success and wellbeing and focus on furthering their own, individual interests. The argument goes that developing individual responsibility, resilience, entrepreneurship, flexibility to deal with unpredictability, and a focus on self-development, self-confidence and self-marketing, will lead to improved self-esteem and positivity, self-fulfilment, improved employability and freedom and autonomy (Chandler, 2016; Türken et al, 2016).

Equally, the state itself is constituted as burdensome, inefficient, costly, uncompetitive and an obstacle to economic growth. Instead, market principles, the promotion of business, privatisation and competition are promoted as freedom from the state and the neoliberal narrative holds that only marketisation will lead to economic growth, improved productivity and performance, better services, and improved educational outcomes. Business models have been transferred to public spheres and fields such as education and health services have been marketised. Under neoliberalism, a key role of the state is to empower individuals to further their interests (Davies and Bansel, 2007).

Perhaps paradoxically, neoliberalism populations are encouraged to believe that the marketised state of insecurity, with its focus on individual freedom, can provide social mobility, equality and meritocracy (Berlant, 2011).

However, these freedoms are in fact mostly myths (Bourdieu, 1998) and fantasies (Berlant, 2011) in which we are encouraged to believe, and to desire: Firstly,

neoliberalism involves the production of subjects who understand themselves as free, but who are in fact tightly governed (Rose, 1999). ‘Freedom’s prevalent role today is to create subjects who accept the conditions of normalized precarization. It protects the state of insecurity, now an integral element in the process of subject formation.’ (Vujanovic, 2016: n/p). The focus on individualisation directly masks the processes of subjectivation: the cultural, political and social construction of the self (Bourdieu, 1998). The self-work promoted under neoliberalism is not actual freedom: ‘this interiority and self-reference is not an expression of independence, but rather the crucial element in the pastoral relationship of obedience’ (Lorey, 2015:3).

Equally, scholars argue that the state has not retreated, it has simply changed its focus. Rather than focussing on the welfare of the population, the neoliberal state in fact is surveilling and coercive (Chadderton and Colley, 2012; Dean, 2002), what Harvey (2003) referred to as the shift from care to control in the role of the state. A key role of the neoliberal state as Foucault argued, is to ensure that the population broadly consents to its values and policies, and self-regulates in response. This is done, by the creation of ‘devices . . . that promise to create individuals who do not need to be governed by others, but will govern themselves’ (Rose, 1996: 45).

The focus on individualism means that social, political and economic structures and problems are masked (Bourdieu, 1998). The risk and responsibility for education, employment and well-being is shifted to individuals and any failure to reach goals is seen in terms of an individual’s own shortcomings (Davies and Bansel, 2007). As others argue, it is mainly only the privileged who are in a position to transform precarity into a virtue (Allen 2016; Lorey, 2015).

Further, whilst ever stronger individualism is instilled, collective identity and communality are constrained (Türken et al, 2016), and the possibility of resistance and alternatives to neoliberalism via for example, collective power such as unions, is lessened (Davies and Bansel, 2007). As Bourdieu (1998) argues, the neoliberal project of individualism is in fact ‘*a programme of the methodical destruction of collectives*’ (emphasis in original, pp. 95–96).

Lastly, it is well-documented that inequalities have increased, and opportunities for upward social mobility have decreased under neoliberalism (e.g. Davies and Bansel, 2007). However Berlant (2011) argues that ‘conventional good life fantasies’ (p. 2) around secure work, family life, institutions, economic and political systems continue to co-exist with narratives of precarity and flexibility in films, literature, mass media and politics. These fantasies are fraying in the neoliberal moment, however, we stay attached to them. By sustaining the fantasies of a good life, Berlant argues that relationships of ‘cruel optimism’ between the life we desire, and ourselves, are being created in which fantasies of a good life are peddled, but these are ultimately unattainable and our attachment to certain myths, such as individual freedom, as a society, is part of what prevents us from achieving ‘a good life’:

‘A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing [...] These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially’ (Berlant, 2011:1)

I have argued in this section that neoliberalism, and narratives of precarity and individualism as freedom function as governing technology alongside narratives of security, all of which ensure our general compliance with the neoliberal system. As others have argued, education has arguably been reconfigured to produce compliant neoliberal subjects (e.g. Davies and Bansel, 2007). In this paper, I analyse the current government careers strategy in England and Wales as a form of governing technology which aims to ensure compliance with neoliberalism, employing Bourdieu's and Lorey's understanding of the state of insecurity and the ontology of freedom, and Berlant's notions of fantasies of 'a good life' and the relationship of cruel optimism created by the peddling of these.

## **Methodology**

In this paper I analyse the implications of the shift of the responsibility for school-to-work transitions and career guidance from discrete services, to schools. In particular I focus on the two most recent policy documents relating to career guidance, 'Careers strategy: making the most of everyone's skills and talents' (DfE, 2017) and 'Careers guidance and access for education and training providers. Statutory guidance for governing bodies, school leaders and school staff' (DfE, 2018). I draw on the work of Butler (2011) to analyse the discourses promoted via the careers strategy. I analyse the careers strategy as a form of governing technology which aims to ensure that the population are kept on-message with the current political and economic regime by shaping individual subjects (Rose, 1999). In such an analysis, policy is understood to allocate roles to subjectivate the population to consent to their roles in a given regime. I ask what discourses and norms are being cited and promoted by the guidelines, both explicitly and implicitly? What role do notions of security/insecurity play in the

strategy? What kinds of expectations of the economy and the labour market are being constituted? What kind of lives and job roles are young people being encouraged to aspire to via the strategy? What kind of subjects does the strategy aim to produce?

How realistic are the aspirations constituted by the strategy likely to be?

Drawing on Butler, I analyse the strategy as shaped by, and aiming to shape, certain norms, discourses, identities and attitudes. I draw on the notion of performativity, as understood by Butler, as the process by which norms are (re)produced. Performatives, although often referred to as ‘utterances’, are frequently unspoken, but can be recognised as discourses or citations of discourses or norms. Performatives subjectify and allocate roles to individuals and groups. Education policy allocates roles via performatives to different actors- teachers, students, other stakeholders.

In the case of a careers strategy in a neoliberal context, performatives might include neoliberalism, security/insecurity, social mobility, a good career. In this paper, I identify the key performatives- both implicit and explicit- in the strategy and analyse their function.

## **An analysis of England’s strategy for school-to-work transition support**

### **The insecure state of school-to-work transitions in England**

Firstly, I argue that school-to-work transitions arrangements are contributing to the structural normalisation of the ‘state of insecurity’. The Education Act 2011 indicated the Coalition government’s withdrawal of support for a discrete, publicly funded school-to-work transitions service in England altogether. Responsibility for school-to-work transitions support in England was handed over from local authorities to schools, coming into force from September 2012. Schools have in the main not been

provided with any extra funds, nor training, to fulfil the new requirements. This occurs in the context of the widespread reduction in government support and funding for public services, whilst at the same time the government has promoted this reduction in services as increased school autonomy, and flexibility to provide transitions support as the school deems suitable (Hughes, 2013).

In the context of school autonomy and freedom, guidelines on providing career guidance, provided to schools by the Department for Education (DfE) were initially extremely vague. In response to criticism, these guidelines have been revised and updated in 2014 and again in 2015, 2017 and 2018, and from 2018 schools are expected to adhere to the so-called ‘Gatsby benchmarks’ (Holman, 2014) which are generally accepted among practitioners and scholars as good practice in careers work and provide a clear, common, long-awaited framework for schools on career guidance. However critics have noted that the government guidelines remain vague and there is very little information on *how* career guidance should be provided (DfE 2017, 2018; Dominguez Reig, 2017). In the initial iterations of the DfE guidelines, there was no mention at all of the work of careers professionals. This has now to some extent been addressed and careers professionals and ‘qualified practitioners’ are mentioned briefly (e.g. DfE 2017: 25). However, there is still no requirement for schools to employ qualified careers advisers, and the most recent evidence suggests that less than a third of school careers coordinators have formal qualifications in careers work, and that this percentage is decreasing (McCrone et al., 2009:11).

From 2018 schools have been supported by the Careers and Enterprise Company, which up to then had mainly focused on the engagement of employers with schools

and extra support which seems mainly involve the provision of ‘Enterprise Advisers’ will be made available for all schools by 2020. Funding is also being made available to train what are referred to as ‘Careers Leaders’ at schools, to drive the school careers strategy forward. However critics have noted that the funding will be insufficient to make any real difference and will probably only be enough to support funding for existing staff (Dominguez Reig, 2017). ‘Careers Leaders’ are required to have ‘appropriate training’ (DfE, 2018:13), however it is not specified what this training should be, leaving this open to interpretation. My own research suggests that many schools do not prioritise qualifications when employing staff to conduct careers work (Chadderton, 2015). Indeed, elsewhere I have shown that the policies of the Labour government with the Connexions service, followed by the neoliberal policies of the Coalition government and now the Conservative government, have undermined the careers profession, diminished professionalism in careers provision, and led to the erosion of the (comparatively) secure and distinctive professional knowledge base of the careers profession (Chadderton, 2015). Equally, great emphasis is placed on encouraging schools to ensure that young people have contact with employers. Rather than requiring schools to have access to a trained careers advisor and up-to-date labour market intelligence, or suggesting any kind of pedagogic framework which would support young people to successfully learn from such encounters (Andrews and Hooley, 2017), ‘... every school should begin to offer every young person seven encounters with employers – at least one each year from year 7 to year 13 – and meet this in full by the end of 2020.’ (DfE, 2018:9)

In addition, the strategy has allowed for the development of a market of organisations and companies offering careers work, employer contacts and experiences of different



sectors of the labour market to schools. These include education-focussed organisations and outreach arms of large companies. Schools are not required to use accredited organisations for support. However, rather than providing schools with the autonomy to choose suitable transitions and careers support for their pupil population and local area, the sheer number of organisations offering support for schools, teachers and pupils in careers has left many schools confused (Chadderton, 2015; Hughes, 2013). Equally, the services provided by these organisations is unregulated, inconsistent, can be unsuitable and is not necessarily provided by trained and experienced individuals.

Research suggests that this new responsibility shifts more work and funding demands to overstretched schools (Chadderton, 2015; Hooley et al., 2012). International evidence from New Zealand and the Netherlands suggests that a school-based model of career guidance and transitions support risks significant deterioration in provision (Hooley et al., 2012; Watts, 2013) and this is indeed proving the case here in England (Chadderton, 2015; Hooley et al., 2014;). School-to-work transitions support in England has become a postcode lottery: inconsistent, under-funded, patchy and inadequate overall. Knowledge and expertise has been eroded and the service provided is certainly far from secure. Arrangements for school-to-work transitions support can be seen as contributing to the normalisation of the state of insecurity: the nourishing of notions of school freedom, autonomy and sovereignty, whilst in fact fuelling an increase in precarity and instability of support for school-to-work transitions.

### **Normalisation of business dominated economy**

Secondly, I argue that the careers strategy can be seen to normalise a business-dominated, marketised economy and labour market. The neoliberal economy is dominated by private business, marketisation and a lack of regulation by the state of business and finance. Even public services are marketised. The DfE's careers strategy promotes business both as a dominant activity in labour market, and as a job role to which to aspire. For example, the guidelines state that an 'enterprise advisor', who can set up partnerships with business, will be made available to all schools, 'a senior volunteer from business – who helps unlock relationships with other local businesses' (DfE, 2018:13). Equally, examples of possible activities to support school-to-work transitions include 'business games and enterprise competitions' (DfE, 2018:21-22). Rather than promoting a range of job roles or subject positions, then, the DfE guidelines focus on the promotion of and citation of business and market-focussed discourses and subjectivities.

### **The good employee**

Thirdly, I argue that the guidelines constitute what could be viewed as the good employee. This good employee will freely aspire to acquiring the skills and experiences which employers want, be comfortable navigating an insecure labour market patterns and practices, and boost economic growth through their career choices.

The guidelines emphasise the young people's individual choices and needs. Phrases such as 'needs of the individual' 'personal choices' appear throughout, as the strategy states it aims to

‘help young people and adults choose the career that is right for them.’ (DfE, 2018:2).

Thus the strategy cites neoliberal narratives promoting individualism and personal fulfilment. However, whilst on the one hand, the good employee constituted in the guidelines follows their own individual, freely chosen career pathways, the guidelines emphasise that career success is about making oneself attractive to employers, indeed, constituting oneself as ‘employable’.

‘all young people to understand the full range of opportunities available to them, to learn from employers about work and the skills that are valued in the workplace and to have first-hand experience of the workplace’ (DfE, 2017:4)

‘A clear focus on the enterprise and employability skills, experience and qualifications that employers want can support preparation for work’ (DfE 2018:21)

Therefore self-fulfilment and individualism as understood in the guidelines, is in fact constituted as aligning oneself with the needs of employers. As Lorey (2015) puts it, subjects in the state of insecurity are required to occupy that paradoxical position ‘between empowerment and subjugation’ (p.31). The ideal learner-employee perceives oneself as free, and thus empowered, and yet desires to acquire the right skills and experience which happen to be needed by employers.

The main skills promoted in the guidelines for young people aspiring to enter the labour market, are enterprise and self-promotion, Examples of given of possible activities to support school-to-work transitions are as follows:

- careers events such as careers talks, careers carousels and careers fairs
- transitions skills workshops such as CV workshops and mock interviews
- mentoring and e-mentoring
- employer delivered employability workshops;

(DfE, 2018:21-22)

Whilst I would certainly argue that such activities could be very useful, they are also particularly useful to, and geared towards, navigating an unstable labour market and insecure working patterns and practices. Thus it could be argued that the guidelines themselves contribute to the normalising of insecure working patterns and practices.

Moreover, the guidelines state that these skills, needed by employers, will boost economic growth

‘make sure employers have people with the right set of skills working for them which will boost economic growth and productivity’ (DfE, 2017:7)

This problematically makes a connection between individual decisions and pathways through education, learning and work, and economic growth. It implies that economic growth is a result of individual aspirations and educational decisions, while masking structural issues and indeed, government’s and business’ role in economic growth.

### **Raising aspirations to improve social mobility**

Fourthly, the guidelines constitute young people as having low aspirations, and as individually responsible- via their inadequate aspirations- for low levels of social mobility. The careers strategy is trumpeted as being part of ‘the government’s plan to make Britain fairer, improve social mobility and offer opportunity to everyone’ (DfE, 2017). A key aim of the careers strategy is to improve social mobility and opportunity by raising students’ aspirations. This is mentioned several times throughout the guidelines:

‘We want to challenge perceptions and raise aspirations so that subject and career choices are free from gender bias and people look beyond their immediate environment to new and exciting possibilities.’ (DfE, 2017:4)

‘A school’s careers programme should actively seek to challenge stereotypical thinking and raise aspirations.’ (DfE, 2018:6)

‘It motivates young people by giving them a clearer idea of the routes to jobs and careers that they will find engaging and rewarding. Good careers guidance widens pupils’ horizons, challenges stereotypes and raises aspirations. It provides pupils with the knowledge and skills necessary to make successful transitions to the next stage of their life. This supports social mobility by improving opportunities for all young people’ (DfE, 2018:11)

‘Good career and labour market information can also support social mobility by raising pupil’s aspirations and tackling stereotypical assumptions that certain jobs are

“not for people like me”. Career choices for girls, particularly around STEM, are affected in a range of ways.’ (DfE, 2018:15)

The careers strategy thus cites wider neoliberal narratives which claim that individuals’ aspirations are responsible for labour market outcomes, and that low social positions, labour market outcomes and social mobility can be improved simply by raising individual aspirations. The careers strategy thus constitutes the individual as responsible for their own disadvantage or privilege, and silences structural disadvantage in education and the labour market. The labour market itself is implicitly constituted as functioning fairly and equitably.

### **Discussion: school-to-work transitions support as ‘cruel optimism’**

Above I have argued that arrangements for supporting school-to-work transitions in England are contributing to the structural normalization of the ‘state of insecurity’; that these arrangements contribute to normalising a business-dominated, marketised economy and labour market; that a ‘good employee’ in this labour market will freely aspire to acquiring the skills and experiences which employers want, be comfortable navigating insecure labour market patterns and practices, and boost economic growth, social mobility and equality of opportunity through their career choices. Throughout the careers strategy, neoliberalism functions as performative or hegemonic norm which is cited to constitute notions of ‘good’ or ‘normal’ labour market arrangements, aspirations and selves. I now move on to argue that the government’s careers strategy is ultimately contributing to a relation of cruel optimism between young people, especially under-privileged young people, and the notion of a ‘good life’.

‘...optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or people risks striving; and doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly comforting’ (Berlant, 2011:2)

The DfE careers strategy can be understood as constituting the type of subjects young people need to be to attain a good life, and also creating a fantasy of what a good life looks like. A ‘good’ life, in this strategy, is constituted as a ‘good’ job, which is ‘engaging and rewarding’ (DfE, 2018:11), personal choice with regard to work and study within an equitable labour market, an alliance between individual needs and employer needs, and social mobility. The cruel optimism is that this is simply a fantasy for many, especially those who are not class privileged, as it is either unattainable, or unsatisfactory. The fantasies promoted in the guidelines are as follows:

The first fantasy is that young people in England are being provided with good school-to-work transitions guidance and support at all. The careers strategy, as Berlant (2011) would put it, ‘ignites a sense of possibility’ (p.2), by reassuring young people that they will be provided with transitions support. However, as explained above, support for school-to-work transitions is inadequate and patchy. For example, the focus on engagement with employers has come at the expense of the professional careers work. However, as I have argued elsewhere, whilst perhaps well able to provide insights into their own fields, employers are unlikely to be able to provide up-

to-date information about different training routes and other fields, do not tend to have access to up-to-date and relevant labour market information, and thus cannot be a substitute for professional advisers (Chadderton, 2015). Although few would deny that contacts with employers and local businesses may be beneficial to young people as part of their school careers, a wealth of research has shown that careers work is most effective as part of a programme of curriculum-integrated careers education and work-related learning (see e.g. Watts, 2014). However, the previous statutory requirement of schools to provide careers education and work-related learning has disappeared altogether. In addition, international evidence suggests that school-based guidance systems tend to have weak links to the labour market (Bimrose et al., 2014; Watts, 2013:447). Education Business Partnerships, which, when they work effectively, provide a bridging service between schools and business and industry, have had their funding cut by many councils (Hughes et al., 2015). The ‘cruel optimism’ in this narrative is that good transitions support is in fact patchy and not available to all, and certainly not via this model- it is a fantasy which fills the gap where actual transitions support should be.

Secondly, the narrative in the careers strategy that the neoliberal, business-dominated economy will provide young people with ‘a good life’ is a fantasy. As explained above, neoliberalism and the privatisation and marketisation of public utilities, services, institutions and goods has produced insecurity in work and housing. This increases inequalities rather than decreases them. Neoliberalism is dependent on a low wage, low skill economy (Marsh, 2011), and many people, especially those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, will have to take jobs in low-skilled, low-paid work, whether they work in the private or public sector.



A third fantasy for young people in the careers strategy is that ‘free choice’ and ‘individual fulfilment’ is available for them in the form, for example, of further study opportunities and in the wider labour market. However, this can be considered a fantasy because, as others have argued, the point of capitalism is not fulfilled workers, it is profit. In fact, the aligning of workers’ individual interests to the interests of employers, so employees find a personal meaning and purpose in the type of work available, is a deliberate strategy of neoliberal subjectivation, which aims to render the population less dissatisfied and less likely to rebel (Rose, 1999; Lorey, 2015).

A fourth fantasy in the careers strategy is the narrative that developing entrepreneurial and employability skills will mean young people will be able to successfully navigate the unequal and precarious labour market, and will get good jobs. However, although the majority of us are required to constantly self-market and live with contingency and precarity, this precarity does not mean freedom, creative space, flexibility and liberation for those without a safety net of privilege (Allen, 2016). Many in fact experience underemployment, low pay and stress.

The fifth and final fantasy I identify in this paper, is that economic growth, social mobility and greater equality in the labour market is achievable via raising student aspirations and employers working with schools. Berlant identifies particular ‘fraying fantasies’ of neoliberal societies, including meritocracy, upward social mobility, and social equality. These fraying fantasies involve viewing any inequalities in the labour market or lack of social mobility as an individual issue, and a result of individuals’ stereotypical thinking and low aspirations, just as the careers strategy does. However,

this view masks deeply ingrained classed, gendered and raced structural inequalities in education and the labour market. It is actually very unlikely that transitions support and career guidance from employers will eradicate inequalities in the labour market, when employers as a group are inextricably bound up with the racialised, classed and gendered nature of the labour market. Indeed, school-to-work transitions programmes cannot on their own improve social mobility. In fact, some scholars have argued that social mobility is a myth itself (e.g. Kupfer, 2015). Moreover, the narrative that educational investment will lead to economic development has dominated education policy and reform since the 1970s, but as others have successfully argued, investment in education does not on its own lead to economic development (e.g. Ainley, 1994; Warmington, 2015).

The cruel optimism embedded in the careers strategy is that fantasies are peddled which young people are encouraged to invest in, such as social equality being attainable via the raising of individual aspirations, or a good job being available for all who develop entrepreneurial skills and yet the production of desire for these particular fantasies actually contributes to the impossibility of it being achieved: social equality will never be attainable simply by raising the aspirations of individuals, and good jobs for all will not be achieved by developing individual entrepreneurial skills. However, as long as we are distracted by the agenda of raising individual aspirations and developing individual entrepreneurial skills, the labour market is likely to remain unequal, creating a relationship of cruel optimism between young people and the fantasy of a good life, good job and equal society.

**Conclusion: school-to-work transitions support as neoliberal governance**

The DfE's careers strategy, then, is an example of neoliberal governing technology. It is a strategy that is unlikely to increase economic productivity or social mobility or fulfill actual individual needs. Rather it is in fact a strategy which aims to contribute to the production of subjects who serve the interests of neoliberalism 'such that their singular actions only *seem* personal, effective and freely intentional, while really being the effects of powerful, impersonal forces' (Berlant, 2011:15). Subjects need to be brought to consent to their position in the 'state of insecurity' by internalised self-regulation via education.

I am not arguing that this process is necessarily a fully, or even partially, conscious one on the part of policy-makers-although it may be. Instead I am arguing, following Butler (2011), that neoliberalism is simply acting as a performative, a hegemonic norm which is repeatedly cited and functions to actually produce neoliberal society as a 'reality' (Butler 2011; Chadderton, 2018). The hegemonic norm of neoliberalism, which shapes subjects, attitudes and social arrangements, guides government policy as well.

In this analysis the careers strategy can be viewed as aiming to produce neoliberal subjects who take responsibility for their own social position and do not expect the state to take responsibility. The subjects of the careers strategy are being taught to fit the demands of an insecure and unstable labour market, to expect to live with precarity and even see this as an opportunity for personal fulfilment, individual empowerment and liberation, which they interpret this as freedom and autonomy, while in fact, the strategy aims to make them governable (Lorey, 2015; Rose, 1999). They are being taught 'to imagine oneself as a solitary agent who can and must live

the good life promised by capitalist culture' (Berlant, 2011:167). As Warmington (2015) argues this is about governing subjects 'into the kind of happy flexibility suited to neoliberal capitalism.' (p. 272). It is likely this will contribute to the further embedding of class, race and gender inequalities as the state of insecurity, although reproducing precarity for most of the population, privileges those who can benefit from flexibility and instability due to a safety net of privilege.

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