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# NO TIME TO FOOL AROUND WITH THE WRONG EDUCATION: SOCIALISATION FRAMES, TIMING AND HIGH-STAKES EDUCATIONAL DECISION MAKING IN CHANGING RURAL PLACES

Michael Corbett

## Abstract ]

*There have been as yet few qualitative analyses of either the lives of rural youth or their schooling in North America. While urban or suburban sociologies of education have focused heavily on the social mobility of youth, rural sociologies of education have focused on the geographic mobility of youth, typically out of rural areas. Indeed there have been a number of studies of youth migration from rural parts of North America, but these have almost exclusively focused on national or regional data sets. This study uses mixed methods in order to understand the interplay of structure and agency linking postsecondary decision making for rural youth and their families with the broader transformations at the structural level. Using semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observation, and drawing theoretically on the work of Pierre Bourdieu, this paper analyses decision-making frames employed by families in a coastal community to understand and navigate the increasing demand for formal education their children face in changing rural communities.*

## Keywords ]

Identity, Educational decision making, Place, Rural, School to work transition

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## Introduction

The literature on emerging adulthood has demonstrated that the transition from adolescence to adulthood, dependence to autonomy and school to work is much more complex and variable in contemporary capitalist societies. There has been considerable work done on how this transformation is experienced by urban youth, but much less concerning how similar life stage transitions are handled in rural places. Although rural places have often been presented as fundamentally different from urban spaces in western cultural mythology and in traditional rural sociology dating from Toynbee, contemporary rural scholarship has shown how global change forces have drawn urban and rural places together in a multitude of ways. Yet, traditional narratives of the stereotypical rural–urban distinction remain prominent in popular culture (e.g. the blue–red state division in US politics, or the distinction between rich multiethnic Canadian cities and poor monoethnic rural communities).

One side of this narrative of social change is the idea that modernity empties rural people from the countryside and deposits them in the urban world. Indeed, many rural people around the world have been caught in migrations, displacements and diasporas, which have swelled major urban centres globally (Davis, 2006). People do change places both by choice (pull), by force (push) or, more typically, by some combination of the two. Many prominent macro sociologists recognise mobility as both a central feature of contemporary life and a crucial part of high status cultural capital (Bauman, 1998, 2001;

### Associate Professor Michael Corbett

teaches in the School of Education at Acadia University following a 19-year career as a public school teacher in Canadian rural communities. His research focuses on the dynamic and ambivalent relationship between life in Atlantic Canadian coastal communities and the structures and processes of schooling.

**Corresponding author:** Michael Corbett  
Postal address: School of Education, Acadia University, Wolfville, NS, Canada, B4P 2R6.  
Email address: michael.corbett@acadiau.ca.

Sennett, 1998, 2006; Urry, 2000, 2007). At the same time, rural places themselves are changing rapidly as they are drawn into increasingly complex and vast networks of production and consumption of knowledge, goods and services. The capitalist success story of the Walmart chain has been built not through access to highly concentrated major urban markets, but rather in more geographically dispersed small city, town and rural markets. Walmart has become a key part of the expansion of rural service centre communities that allow many country consumers to have, for the first time, access to products and services that were formerly only available in urban places. As networked connections allow information and material goods to spill into rural places these places themselves change.

Part of this change is the emergence of forms of discourse that challenge established rural lifeways and patterns of knowledge production and resource transfer within social institutions like school and family. While compulsory secondary schooling is generally thought to have been established nationally by the 1920s (Sutherland, 1976, 1995), I have argued elsewhere that the idea that protracted formal education is a necessary feature of a 'successful' life, is a relatively new phenomenon in many parts of rural Canada (Corbett, 2001, 2005, 2007b). By the 1990s, a series of economic challenges in primary resource industries in rural Canada appears to have permanently changed the established foundation of many farming, mining, fishing and logging communities.

These structural changes and the discourse that accompanies them have generated conditions of almost universal support for secondary and postsecondary education for most if not all rural children. Established trajectories of early school leaving and immediate adolescent integration into working life and adult social practices in rural communities still exists, but this pattern may be becoming increasingly marginal. In many rural families, however, this new pro-education discourse presents families and youth particularly with a set of unfamiliar challenges and tensions (Dees, 2006). Differently positioned families manage the unfamiliar tensions and challenges of rural restructuring and new youth educational, career and life transitions for youth by employing familiar frames.

Living in changed communities (changing places), most youth in isolated rural places have come to understand that they themselves must 'change places' and move on to higher education and, probably, communities outside their family's lifeworlds. Changing places in both the senses I use here is a source of anxiety as families seek security for their children in the insecure mobile spaces of late modernity. Other tensions include constructing a suitable project of self-identity, which is both creatively fashioned and meets the standardised expectations of audit culture, and managing the problem of timing of key life events in conditions of weakened age-stage norms for mapping life trajectories. For parents, the tension between protection and exposure needs to be negotiated in ways that complicate established community practices of early engagement in adult work and social activity. This tension is situated within familiar metaphorical frameworks as parents imagine trajectories for their children. I conclude with an analysis of relative stakes in life course decision making.

This paper draws on data from 11 parental interviews and 60 interviews with 20 students between the ages of 13 and 18 living in coastal villages in Atlantic Canada. Here I investigate some of the tensions in both the spatial and temporal dimensions of families and youth in the process of setting up an educational and life trajectory under conditions of chronic uncertainty and ambivalence, which as Zygmunt Bauman argues have come to characterise modernity (1991).

### **Standardised individuality**

By the time a child reaches high school people begin to get nervous if there is an indication of a lack of focus. It is said that high school is a time to 'buckle down' and to 'get serious' about school and about life in general. Many students do just this: they hear the message and begin to work on constructing a legitimate adult identity, one which is serious, lacks playfulness and, most importantly, has a well thought-out trajectory. The planning and exploration phase in a contemporary middle class life which is considered by powerful institutional agents and ordinary citizens alike to be 'successful', begins earlier and carries on longer than ever before in Western societies. The life-course in post-traditional

societies is said to be no longer determined by tradition, by family and by following well-worked family pathways. A contemporary life is a 'project' (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1990), a set of linked engagements that develop into a narrative of purpose, which is typically captured in one of the central pieces of personal documentation and self-promotion generated by a modern person, the CV/resume. Increasingly, the standardised accountability measures allegedly used for educational quality control are supplemented by individualised instruments of self-construction like the portfolio.

With the rise of consumerism and individualisation (Bauman, 2001, 2004; Giddens, 1990, 1991), psychological discourses like that of emerging adulthood have been employed in recent years to frame a new stage in the life course, one that follows the well-established buffer space of adolescence, which includes increasingly non-standard transitions between school and work (Arnett, 2004; Côté, 2005; Gaudet, 2007; Molgat, 2007). In emerging adulthood, which is generally defined as beginning at age 17 (the end of compulsory schooling in most western jurisdictions) and ending somewhere between age 24 and 30, the claim is that young adults do protracted identity work. Transitions from school to work and into established markers of adulthood like conjugal relations, independent living and steady full-time employment are now said to require considerable exploration, self-examination and experimentation. Research in emerging adulthood essentially provides a social psychology for the more individualistically pitched sociological work of contemporary theorists like Giddens, Beck and many others. As traditional life markers and norms are swept away by the rising tide of late modernity, identity construction becomes both crucial and creative lifework for those immediately beyond the secondary school years, but at the same time an ambivalent space in which relatively anomic young adults must make sense of complex and often confusing choices and uncharted trajectories into the supposed stability of full-fledged adult life. As Gee (2000–2001) argues, identity has become a powerful analytical lens for understanding contemporary educational processes. In fact, identity is now less about achieving stability in Erikson's original (1968) sense of the word, than it is an ongoing and endless round of self-creation, reflection, re-creation and choice (Bauman, 1999).

These transitions rather obviously have powerful implications for the way that education is understood and used by contemporary students in advanced capitalist societies. The rise of audit culture and accountability in Western schools over the past two decades is well known. Children are assessed early and often and the assessment continues through beyond schooling into a regime of work performance appraisals. This calling to account as Onora O'Neil (2002) termed it, is one face of an institutional complex attempting to legitimise its work in the context of unpredictability and what Beck and Giddens describe as 'manufactured risk'. Yet, while schools, teachers, students and entire systems have been increasingly 'under the gun' to perform on standardised accountability measures, at the same time young people have been charged with the task of constructing an identity, which is unique, engaged and creative. In other words, youth are now faced with the daunting and probably contradictory challenge of what I call standardised individuality. They are expected to perform well in school in tasks where outcomes are predefined and more or less carefully measured, while they are expected to begin to generate an individualised life project that has few clear directional markers. They are expected to acquire academic capital, but this pursuit is shadowed by the realisation that this acquisition is never enough and never complete. We are now lifelong learners, like it or not.

In terms of school-based assessment, the phenomenon of standard individuality in which an individual is required to perform standardised assessment tasks and present him/herself as a unique, creative, nonstandard individual has entered educational discourse in many ways including in the form of the portfolio. No longer are students asked only to demonstrate their knowledge in high-pressure testing situations (although these are probably not in any sense in retreat), they are also expected to show the trajectory of their academic and extra-curricular lives in a collection of documents that tells a credible developmental story that demonstrates that they are at least on track to create a coherent project self. Entire courses in schools are actually devoted to the preparation and presentation of the portfolio/resume as early as middle school. Middle-class children now recognise that it is important to document and certify their participation in a variety of sports, volunteer

engagements, social and civic activism, participation in organisations, languages and increasingly in travel and cross-cultural activity. Coherence and the appearance of planning are as important as the actual depth and range of engagements documented in a resume. Middle-class youth are now expected to account for themselves from childhood in the compulsory process of building a profile for admission into the best secondary schools, universities, professional programs and graduate schools; for scholarships and for other forms of academic and social recognition. Indeed, the phenomenon of digital self-construction represented by social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and Second Life are new largely informal locations for building a portfolio and for experimenting with identity positions and alternatives.

I will argue here that the well-known structural bias of standardised testing in favour of young people who are positioned in relatively high SES families is only one face of contemporary educational inequality. This bias has been consistently established by both quantitative and qualitative sociological analysis at least since the 1970s. What I think is new in contemporary educational spaces is the way that more creative forms of self-construction have come to augment existing patterns of inequity in schools in more subtle ways, often under the guise of progressive and even emancipatory educational and assessment practices. Additionally, the construction of a credible educated self is nested within geographic communities (places) that provide, to a greater or lesser extent, access to high-status venues for constructing an educated project self, which is considered to be valuable educational capital by institutional gate keepers.

The phenomenon of the resume/portfolio is one example in which select students are drawn into conversations with themselves and with significant others (parents, peers, teachers, etc.) about their individual educational, work and life trajectories. It is rather obvious that the ability to both construct a resume/portfolio and to see the utility of such an exercise is something that is not evenly distributed across the social geography of a given school, community or region. In fact, the whole problem of self-construction and educational life planning, like any other educational activity, is itself brought to life within different fields of vision regarding what

schooling is essentially about. As sociologists like Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990), David Berliner (2006), and Annette Lareau (1989, 2003) have shown in their work on social class and educational orientations, there is a rather sharp distinction between the way differently positioned families interact with systems of formal and informal education. Those families which themselves are positioned in the professional middle class possess a wide variety of tools for engaging institutional authority figures and they pass on these tools to their children in the everyday process of ordinary engagements. Bourdieu's twin concepts of cultural capital and habitus provide an important correction to the discourse of individualisation and choice by demonstrating how the project of self-creation is located within social positions typically understood in terms of race, class and gender, but also in terms of place.

This paper investigates the way that educational planning is undertaken and thought about by a group of 20 youth who attend a regional secondary school in Atlantic Canada. Like much of rural Canada, Atlantic Canadian coastal communities are undergoing structural transformations characterised by well-known factors such as: concentration of resource ownership in traditional industries; declining populations and out-migration; the emergence of eco-tourism and temporary residents (often from urban places); an increasingly networked production, consumption and communication system; the globalisation of markets; the intensification and mechanisation of traditional and emerging forms of resource extraction; and, importantly, the environmental and sustainability challenges that all of the above pose for rural places. Rather than seeing rural places as sitting outside and apart from the global change forces, it is becoming increasingly clear that we need to understand the particular local impacts of changes that are initiated on a wide scale by configurations of power that are not local but global in scope (Beck, 2006). Rural communities are no longer places to hide from these currents, if ever they were.

### **Parental frames: Protection or exposure**

*We don't have the money to let him fool around with the wrong education. He ain't got the luxury of time to frig around. He's got to find something practical that there's jobs in. (Parent)*

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the work of Bourdieu (1984) and Lareau (1989, 2003) is the way that they demonstrate how actors in different social class positions make distinctions or develop different criteria for being good parents. How and to what extent should 'good parents' for instance, attempt to shield or expose their children to media, financial risk, challenges of sexuality and self-care, and navigating the education system. At a fairly basic level, the crucial distinction between protecting and exposing children and youth to the 'realities' of adult life is handled differently in each family. What I think educational sociologists often miss, however, is the extent to which child rearing and socialisation styles and patterns are variable within those categories that have been developed around levels of income. For instance, Bourdieu's 'making a virtue out of necessity' and Lareau's 'natural growth' are similar processes in the sense that they show how parents at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale tend to believe that exposure to ordinary living is itself the best method for learning. This naturalistic approach is anti-intellectual, no-nonsense, embodied and pragmatic as opposed to the pedantic, structured, largely passive training space of the school classroom, the organised, adult led 'activity' or the after school 'lesson'. This general sense of what learning is, and how it is accomplished, mirrors the way that the parents themselves have learned the things that they have in order to become successful in the fields in which they themselves are competent (Hicks, 2002; Lehmann, 2007; Livingstone & Sawchuk, 2004; Rose, 2004). Exposure to adult living is the 'natural' way to learn to be adult and 'you can't learn that in school'.

The ultimate effect is a vision of socialisation experiences which are characterised by sets of class-based practices which, though nuanced, are fundamentally defined by their consistency. As the sociology of education has shifted its focus from a heavy emphasis on the working class victims of what Bourdieu calls the symbolic violence of formal education systems to the way that its middle class 'winners' manage to use these institutions to their advantage (Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2006), it has become increasingly clear that subtle child-rearing and parenting practices are at least as important as what happens in school. I will argue in this section that while the coherence and consistency of these patterns is

indeed established in my particular research location that these patterns, particularly that of 'natural growth', are powerfully contested in a number of ways.

At one level, it is very clear that in this community, some kinds of knowledge are much easier for parents to understand. There is a fundamental tension between relevance and the practical application of knowledge on the one hand, and the acknowledged importance of academic work.

*Yeab, and it's -like there's a lot of stuff I feel in school . . . it's unnecessary - it just takes up their time and you know, you look at 'em strugglin' trying to do it (laughter). It's like you poor kid, I was the same way. Well, I never used it. I just wasted a lot of time trying to figure it out.*

On the other hand, parents expressed, in many ways, the importance of emerging literacies and linguistic abilities for their children. While they tend to understand and construct themselves as pragmatic, work-focused people, this habitus is troubled by what they perceive to be their missing academic skills. Unlike the spectacularly resistant lads and others, there is an ambivalence and a desire for additive academic skills rather than a clean separation of the working habitus from an academic one.

*Sometimes I go to meetings once in a while; I'm very concerned about the fishery. And sometimes I get tongue-tied when talking to people, especially if I know they have more of an education than I do, and stuff like that. And that's what I would like. I would like for 'em (children) to go far enough, for them to join whatever conversation or if they want to apply for any job, to say, 'I've got it upstairs, I can look after it.' . . . And when they're out, maybe 22, 23 years old they can look at the world saying, 'you're mine for the taking'.*

Parents and students then wanted both practicality and academic content and imagined linkages and combinations rather than separation of head and hands and the manual and the mental. The idea of additive resolutions of core tensions is also evident in the way that exposure and protection regarding adult life are balanced and resolved. The idea that young people are exposed to far too much adult-like imagery and activity is a persistent theme in the parent interviews. Yet, there is the competing idea that as an educational trajectory progresses, it ought to be tied more closely with the requirements of adult life, particularly working life. It is virtually impossible for

parents not to make the leap to imagining a working future for their children that in some ways mirrors the economic and occupational structure of the world as they presently know it.

Parents seem to be torn between a community pattern of granting youth early exposure to adult activity as a way of socialising them into the local way of generating wealth and creating community, and shielding them from these same processes. Exposure to work in the fishery was a way of helping youth establish necessary life skills and acquiring the resources required to satisfy various consumer, mobility and romantic desires. The landscape of risk and opportunity was typically opened early for boys who were encouraged to undertake physical toil and risk from an early age. This same risk environment along with the rewards and independence it contained were largely denied girls in the community and their life trajectories typically included a more protracted engagement with institutional schooling, which was partly a way to shield them from early engagement in adult activity. This, not surprisingly, has led to higher levels of formal education and outmigration for women who sought to escape limited opportunity and access to resources in the coastal community (Corbett, 2007c). This resulted in a gender differentiated vision of what constituted good parenting and a correct path for young people through adolescence and into early adulthood. These paths can be seen as interlocked frames, which contain within them different visions of appropriate parenting and a good education. Each of these frames present contested and contextual ways of working through the tensions of the security/exposure conundrum.

### *Five child-rearing frames*

The tension between shielding and exposure is a prominent feature of parental accounts. It is subsequently managed within five broad frames. The first of these is the competitive frame. This frame is common amongst some families immersed in the risk and rewards context of the small boat fishery. Life is generally considered here to be about going head-to-head against the competition for scarce resources and the approach to schooling it tends to foster is one in which students are compared to fishers. They are expected to work hard within the structure of the rules and produce results. Those

who compete well will flourish and survive, while those who do not will struggle and/or leave the field. These families see testing as the unequivocal measure of school production and have narrow, results-focused expectations for their children. This approach commodifies the educational process and relies on counting credentials comparatively. The best way to prepare young adults for this form of engagement is through early competition in schools and at home. School itself is understood as preparation for a fundamentally competitive world of scarce resources. Parents who operate in this frame often speak about spelling and mathematical testing as foundational educational experiences that let children know where they stand.

The second frame is the pragmatic frame. Here, school is essentially constructed not only as work in its own right, but also as direct preparation for working life. Although it is generally accepted that this working life will not typically begin immediately following school as was traditionally the case, the preparation for work ought to be as focused, practical and as short as possible. One-year programs are preferable to anything longer. Apprenticeship-style, hands-on, real world learning is preferable to academic and classroom-based forms of educational engagement. Where it is not pragmatically focused, formal education is an ordeal that must be endured, much as nonsensical credentialism and unreasonable 'rules and regulations' must be tolerated and endured in life. Most of the families who operate from this frame are themselves engaged in labour and clerical-functionary types of work. School is generally understood as 'work for children' and the efficient performance of required tasks is the hallmark of an appropriate educational engagement. At the secondary level, school tasks and curriculum content are continually evaluated for their practical utility, which is measured against an articulation of what it is the student wants to do in working life. Since working life is relatively close at hand in secondary school, time is considered to be of great importance and the sooner a young person can get down to work and engage in educational activities that are 'relevant' the better.

The third frame is the security frame. The security frame is one which is employed across the socioeconomic spectrum more or less. Here, the relative safety of life in the community is counterpoised

with the perceived insecurity of spaces outside the community. This security is, however, highly precarious. The ambivalent narrative of the decline of the fishery and the ramping up of global change forces and urbanisation have generated conditions of ontological insecurity in most Canadian rural communities. Although the community continues to be constructed as a safe place in the sense that personal security and safety are assumed, it is also understood simultaneously as a space that has been invaded by multiple elements of insecurity. The most obvious of these new risks is found in the decline of marine resource stocks, which have created a precarious and uncertain future for the local economy, which continues to be intensively focused on the fishery. The community and established lifeways are everywhere challenged and in flux. Young people are leaving, old industries are collapsing or restructuring radically, land and real property are increasingly falling into the hands of 'outsiders' some of whom have specific ideas for development, and so on. Yet, elements of communal support and social capital are still evident in mutual aid and community organisations such as churches and fire departments. The idea that around here, 'you never have to lock your doors' still hangs on precariously through the changes. This frame is fundamentally ambivalent and filled with tension and to a greater or lesser degree it influences the way that all families think about educational trajectories. In some ways insecurity in urban places challenges the school-based narrative of mobility and out-migration as a desirable and necessary part of a successful life. In other ways such insecurity challenges the state and media-driven economic narrative of the community as a declining rural hinterland.

The fourth frame is the entrepreneurial frame. This frame is also employed within families that continue to be involved in the fishery and that have tended to adapt successfully to the changes in the industry. This frame understands the economic and social crisis of the decline of the resource as one which has forced all players to become more inventive and creative. Just as fishers have had to continually move to new species and harvesting techniques and to conservation and management regimes, so too do students need to become smarter about how they acquire educational resources and

use them. Education is understood as a way of solving difficult problems, which mirror the difficult problems faced within the community. Educational trajectories in this frame are individual and are fundamentally driven by an analysis of changes in the economy. Spatially, the trajectory may be one that takes the student out of the community, or one that immerses him/her in a family or community-based attempt to find entrepreneurial solutions to existing and emerging problems.

The fifth frame is the exploratory frame. This is the frame that is most commonly associated with the professional middle class and to some extent with economically privileged business-owning families. Here the purpose of education is fundamentally a matter of personal growth and the development of a set of human skills quintessentially represented by the liberal arts, humanities and the sciences. These skills are thought to be best developed in university and a protracted post-secondary engagement in academic pursuits that are not immediately convertible into job credentials. The nature of post-secondary work and leisure activity is framed as an exploration of a number of spaces, including self-identity, the foundation of natural and cultural systems, the development and growth of multiple literacies (as opposed to 'relevant', highly specialised, singular literacies), the landscape of institutional structure, process and governance, and eventually, the professional fields in which this knowledge can be applied. This is the frame in which emerging adulthood is recognised as a necessary preparation for integration into knowledge systems and networks that exercise and distribute contemporary forms of power. The idea of exploration and indeed of freedom from necessity at least for the period of emergent adulthood is at the centre of this frame.

These traditional ways of variously exposing and shielding children have now become deeply troubled by economic transformations that have diminished opportunities for unskilled youth to access resources locally. As a result, everyone in the study expressed the perspective that post-secondary education is desirable if not necessary. This troubles social patterns of early engagement in adult activity by creating a moral universe around schooling and abstention from drinking, drug use and early sexual initiation, for example, all of which have ironically



come to be subject to increasingly less normative control.

All of this leads to the conclusion that children now 'grow up too fast'.

### **Timing: Growing up too fast?**

*Time is out of joint.*

*Hamlet, Act 1, Scene 5*

There is a fundamental tension in contemporary schooling between the increasingly tight framing of age-stage tested benchmarks and increasingly loosely structured transitions between schooling and what has been traditionally understood as adult life. As is the case in urban locations, established developmental and social timing patterns and life trajectories have come to be challenged at a number of levels. The well established trajectory of a local school to work transition is still possible, but it is today the subject of derision. At one level, the kind of consumer lifestyle that is considered to mark a successful life cannot easily be sustained with the kind of unskilled employment available locally. In this sense, growing up successfully in the rural village is understood as a spatial problem which is articulated with the common words, 'there's nothing for you here'. I have argued elsewhere that a critical challenge for rural youth is enhancing and to some extent overcoming place attachment through engagements in virtual, geographic and academic spaces beyond the locale (Corbett, 2007a). In other words, an educationally successful rural youth has to learn to leave (Corbett, 2005, 2007b). But along with these spatial challenges come problems related to the timing of life events.

It is common for both parents and students themselves to comment that young people are growing up too fast and particularly, being lured into the ambit of adult pleasures at too early an age. One critical feature of contemporary adolescence is the familiar notion of the disappearance of childhood (Postman, 1984). The central idea is that developmental psychological structures and social norms are challenged by the introduction of mass media into everyday life. The ubiquity of mass media causes adult imagery, ideas and practices to leak into the formerly sealed-off space of childhood and adolescence, effectively causing childhood to disappear. There have been several critiques of this thesis (Aitken,

2001; Buckingham, 2000; Holloway & Valentine, 2000; Lesko, 2001) and the relatively rigid sense of timing it brings to developmental benchmarks. Essentially the critique holds that (a) children are not and have never been totally brainwashed by media and (b) childhood as a unified developmentally defined experience is a myth. Nevertheless, parents and children both hold more or less flexible schedules for appropriate timing for key life events. As the transitional norms around moving from school to work have changed, it is more difficult to see a parallel set of changes around the transition to other markers of adulthood. Families appear to have differential abilities to control the speed and intensity of these transitions.

Youth themselves are highly aware of key timing markers in their own lives. Within each life there are a set of more or less constrained decisions about what to do with time that are consequential in the development of a life project. A failure to deal with the balance between these competing time commitments typically results in drift into default leisure and/or working options that require little or no specific planning.

Adulthood is typically positioned as a linked set of responsibilities, risks and seductions. Early engagement in work leads to control of resources and mobility which leads to early immersion in the party culture of the community. The ability of particular individuals and particular families to protect their children from early initiation into the high risk activities of the contemporary landscape of the community is in part linked to the way that families understand good parenting. Some young people employ a moralistic discourse around the tension between wanting to 'be good' and stay the educational course and succumbing to their weakness and inability to resist drugs, alcohol, fast vehicles, risky sexual behaviour and emotional entanglements. These adult-like attachments allow students to 'fall into' what is understood as an established male-dominated party culture which is a localised representation of one sort of emerging adulthood. The 'adulthood' into which one is thought to emerge, though, is nothing other than the aimless, party culture that has operated on the margins of the community for generations and which is thought to be growing with the structural changes that have rocked the community and many rural

communities in recent years. In other words, what was in recent community history a normal transition into working life and adult society can now become confinement to a marginal existence on the edges of a community that can no longer support many hard-drinking and hard-working people.

The extent to which particular families are immersed in party culture and the extent to which they can insulate their children from the seduction of ‘falling into’ this culture and out of school are variably distributed. There is a strong tradition among men to both work and party hard and so this life on the margins is actually well integrated into the working life of primary resource industries, which have sustained the community for generations. To control the timing of these and other changes is one measure of a family’s power and indeed of the power of the individuals within these families, including children. One way of thinking about child sexual abuse, for instance, is in terms of a lack of control regarding the timing of sexual initiation.

When parents comment that their children are growing up too fast, they may be identifying their own powerlessness to circumvent, prevent or prepare their children for resisting the pull of life in the adult community. They may also, however, be expressing the idea that an early engagement in adult activity is a good and appropriate thing and that their children are precocious. They may, in fact, be saying both of these things at the same time. As numerous studies of the varied trajectories of young people moving through adolescence and more or less protracted emergent adult identity explorations have shown, there are many paths through the space between the completion of secondary schooling and through the 20s. These paths involve multiple answers to each of the timing questions posed above.

Rather than see the flexible timing of these life events as a feature of the new choice focused psychology of emerging adolescence and looser norms surrounding the life trajectory, I have come to see flexible timing as a feature of social privilege and what I have called elsewhere ‘mobility capital’. The ability to control the pacing of key transitions outlined in Figure 1 works in tandem with capacity to control and plan mobility decision making, particularly the mobility required to acquire higher education and to escape the seduction of ‘bad

- When and how much to study?
- How much time to spend on leisure?
- When to spend time with friends
- When your parents can no longer force you to do anything
- When your teachers can no longer force you
- When to get a driver’s license
- When you make your own decisions
- When to drink and use substances
- When to have a steady relationship
- When to have what form of sex
- When to complete each grade
- When to graduate
- When you live with the consequences of your decisions
- When to leave home
- When you are able to support yourself
- When you are able to take care of yourself
- When to get a job
- When to settle down
- When to have children

Figure 1: Timing questions

influences’. Those families that have the resources to support an extended adolescence, adopt and promote looser frames around the timing of life events. These looser frames include monitored, low-stakes engagements in part-time work, controlled peer socialising, supported local mobility in family vehicles, access to mobile communication technologies to allow for distance socialising and parental monitoring and explicit safe-sex conversations and support. In other words, they can afford to allow their children the space to explore and to do the protracted identity work described in the emerging adulthood literature. Exploration of the self and engagement in forms of study that may not be immediately relevant and job related are part of these looser exploratory and entrepreneurial frames. Within each of these frames is the understanding that achieving something worthwhile takes time and is a creative process that involves personal growth and engagement with challenging ideas. The idea that

young people need to find their way to a professional career and/or satisfying, creative life options is not particularly frightening, nor is the idea that this journey may well extend into a person's late 20s. The possession of family resources to accomplish this highly complex parenting is obviously not evenly distributed representing another crucial dimension of contemporary cultural capital. More is expected of both children and of parents to keep 'kids between the ditches' as one parent put it, and then to 'wait in the ditches' to catch them when they stray from the path.

On the other hand, families that articulate tight time frames and work to focus their children on a purely pragmatic, employment-focused secondary and postsecondary trajectory raise the stakes for their children forcing clearer, goal-directed choices. In this way understandings of appropriate timing dovetail with the importance of choosing the right high school courses (typically practical ones that prepare the child for his/her chosen employment path) and the right post-secondary program. There is relatively little time for those families working from the pragmatic and competitive frames. So while there is increasing recognition that post-secondary education is necessary, there is also heightened nervousness concerning the way that particular programs produce or do not produce a job-ready graduate. University is generally identified as the kind of educational space that both takes too long and which is not sufficiently articulated with the kinds of job markets that are relatively quickly and readily accessed locally.

### **Big decisions: Exploration or getting it right**

The idea of emerging adulthood is characterised by deferral of those benchmarks, which have indicated fully fledged adulthood, that is, conjugal relations, full-timework and independent living. The social space of late modernity is also characterised by a breakdown and diversification of established normative patterns including: (a) traditional life trajectories (educational, work, conjugal); (b) the importance of face-to-face communities in which these life trajectories were normally lived out; (c) social norms regulating a wide range of social behaviour, particularly concerning gender construction and relations; (d) the timing of major

life transitions that have now become highly individualised and diverse; and (e) established forms of family, conjugal and affinity relationships. This is characterised by Gaudet (2007) by three central features: role reversibility (the ability to enter and exit from what are defined traditionally as adult responsibilities), the breakdown of the social control consensus and the emergence of agency and choice as core features of individual experience. In addition, these normative transitions have reflected changes in the deep structure of material life, importantly, consumption and production networks, which have become increasingly de-localised.

In a sense this period of emergent adulthood, as it is generally defined, amounts to the kind of life space that was historically granted to highly privileged classes. I am not entirely convinced that so much has changed. In fact, the age at which a person was engaged in full-time employment has been an important marker of social class position with working classes drawn into full-time employment and out of formal education at younger ages. The establishment of compulsory education is also typically understood as a universal social mechanism to ensure that children were given a protracted period of time to develop emotionally, physically, socially and intellectually before being put to work. The difficulty with the emerging adulthood literature and the functionalist historical tradition is that they appear to assume that the widening space between childhood and adulthood is a universal feature of late modernity culminating in the present moment with a new protracted identity exploration space, which follows secondary school graduation. However, all youth do not experience the temporal space between the ages of 17 and 24 as an open-ended identity search. In fact, most youth from what might be called working class or low SES families are pressured to 'get serious' and to do it quickly.

This challenge first emerges in secondary school in conversations with parents, teachers and peers about course selection and postsecondary aspirations. I had expected to find that the children from more affluent fishing families and the handful of youth from professional families would be more 'serious' and settled about the landscape of post-secondary education and the 'options' available there. A great deal of sociological

research has demonstrated that one important aspect of cultural capital is both the understanding and family-based networks necessary to navigate and see the relevance in post-secondary education. For those whose family capital is caught up in localised networks, apprenticeship and less formal ways of transferring knowledge and resources across generations, the world of higher education has been understood as an 'irrelevant' and foreign space in which social practices are incoherent and difficult to penetrate for working class youth. For those young people and their families, the pragmatic and competitive frames make selection of post-secondary options a highly consequential process.

Much of rural Canada is still a place where a large proportion of adults have never experienced higher education and its pathways and processes and indeed the careers to which it can lead are often absent from the occupational structure of many rural communities. However, the discourse of rural decline has positioned post-secondary education as a functional necessity for all youth. At the level of discourse this argument has clearly taken hold. At the level of practice though, the challenge for families of choosing appropriate programs for children is both a novel and a high-stakes challenge. Where money is limited and where the frames used to understand the purpose of education are fundamentally instrumental, parents tend to approach the education of their children as a relatively short term and highly focused investment. As one parent put it:

*he (son) knows what he wants to do and he knows what he needs to get there. That's good because he can't afford to fool around in university for three or four years. That would be a waste coming back with nothing, or with a degree that ain't gonna get him nothing.*

This attitude and approach supports the qualitative work of Rose (2004), Smyth and Hattam (2004) and Lehmann (2007) whose predominantly working-class informants saw themselves choosing educational pathways that led directly to employment. Unlike Willis' (1977) famous 'lads' or the panoply of resistant anti-heroes that other critical educational ethnographers have found, these contemporary students find their way more or less quietly into trades and working-class jobs that they actually choose for themselves.

What is interesting in this quote is the clear pragmatic frame, but also the equally clear idea that this child is seen as an autonomous agent. This parent does not take direct responsibility for the child's higher education in the sense that it is the son who cannot afford a protracted, unfocused degree program. The young man is cut loose from family support already and he is responsible for making sensible choices that will support his direct transition from formal education to economic independence. This contrasts with the view of a parent whose words typify the exploratory frame.

*I'm not telling her what to do. I know that she wants to go to university. I don't know what she should take really and I don't think she knows either. I think that's her job when she gets out of here, you know, figuring out what she wants to do. It's hard for the young people today, there's so much choice and I don't want to do anything to force her one way or the other. We've told her we'll be there for her as long as she needs us. Might have to mortgage the house and sell the boat, but whatever she wants to do, she can do it.*

The high-stakes decision is difficult to make and it is made with great care and considerable deliberation. When there is uncertainty, which there often is given the novelty of the process in 'practical' families which lack post-secondary experience and traditions, the default option is typically to defer entry and to take a local job in the interim. In fact, for a number of my interview subjects the decision was sufficiently problematic, complicated and fraught with danger that individuals were planning to take time off following high school graduation to work at low wage local jobs and to consider options and to save for post-secondary education. This strategy, rather obviously, increases the likelihood that a young person will integrate into traditional adult responsibilities and commitments like pregnancies, car payments, social commitments and networks and so on.

The transition from school to work to school in different combinations and timing sequences is becoming highly variable and an important question is the extent to which pressure in more economically challenged families to get the big decisions right inevitably leads to not making them at all. In other words, by doing exactly what teachers and school people have goaded working-class families to do for so long (that is, to take the

process seriously and engage with children in educational decision making), are these families potentially scaring their own children away from high status forms of postsecondary participation? Ironically it is not only a lack of seriousness or an open resistance to the educational process that leads to deferral and increased chances of absorption into local networks and commitments, employment and party culture. It can also be the fear of making the wrong high-stakes decision that both speeds up the pace of timing crucial transitions and forces youth to make tough decisions quickly or alternatively to defer and wait. As Côté (2006) has demonstrated in his research on emerging adulthood, the most 'at risk' youth are those who extend their identity exploration period and end up unable to recover lost ground.

As such, risky, high-stakes educational decisions are considered in the context of negative security frames that position the world outside the community as a dangerous space full of violence, pollution, strangers, isolation and high living costs. All of this might be a rationalisation and a recipe for remaining close to home in a relatively secure albeit challenged rural place that offers limited opportunities, deferring what is presented as the inevitability and unavoidability of higher education and leaving. The expansion of the low-wage service economy in nearby rural service centres at least provides something to do in a known place with established networks of social capital that continue to provide a measure of stability if not comfort.

### **Changing places: Border crossing, cosmopolitanism and consumer choice**

*Mobility, the ability to move to another physical or virtual location when things change in the local environment, is becoming a defining feature of the elites in the new capitalism . . . elites today can use their mobility to 'flee' local conditions and restraints. Leaving the 'locals' to clean up the 'messes' they leave behind, whether these messes are changed ecologies or economies (Gee, 2000–2001, p. 121).*

The limitation of the analysis of class and life trajectories presented by sociologists like Bourdieu and Lareau is their relatively unidimensional understanding of parenting as a way of playing out hands dealt from stacked decks as though the

players are relatively unaware and sealed off from one another in social class containers. The habitus for instance assumes a habitat. Rural places, particularly isolated ones, can easily be seen as homogenous, sealed-off habitats. This was, to some extent, the case in many parts of rural Canada until relatively recently. Today the changing places represented by networked, economically and media-integrated rural communities and their inhabitants are increasingly coordinated with broader spaces of regional, national and global transit. The habitus leaks and it is challenged by the invocation that young people 'cannot stay here' as well as by the allure of more exciting places (Baeck, 2004). While both understand the possibility of individuals breaking out of their social constraints, the relatively 'coherent and convenient' menus of choice apprehended by everyone in the game leads to a relatively static and predictable set of outcomes. However, what I have found is a group of parents and students who understand that the world has changed significantly and that while something like the rural habitus can certainly be said to exist, it is at the same time understood to be endangered. As one parent put it, 'we are an endangered species, just like the whales, only nobody cares about us'.

Like natural habitats around the world, social habitats are significantly compromised, particularly in rural places. As a result of this compromised habitat, nobody any longer seems to have faith that the places that have sustained people for generations will continue to do so. Every habitus these days is challenged by highly visible alternatives and charged with a chronic ambivalence perhaps most prominently illustrated by debates around climate change and peak oil. Some critics actually see a return to smaller regional ecologies and hands-on sustainability practices in the traditional rural sense as our best way forward (Berry, 2001; Bowers, 2006; Kunstler, 2005, 2008; Theobald, 1997). Nobody knows exactly where to turn for safety and security or how to put their children on the road to a sustainable future. Everything is fraught with risk, including the academic habitus of the carefully reared middle class. The idea that 'natural growth' and 'concerted cultivation' are enacted by differently social class positioned agents is far too simplistic.

What I have found rather is that school success appears to be marked by both academic engagement and also by a flexibility and openness to new ideas, people, spaces and places, effectively a cosmopolitan sensibility focused on difference, diversity, space and mobility rather than similarity, continuity, homogeneity and place. Ironically in families, a pragmatic, serious focus on making sure that postsecondary choices are 'correct' and 'relevant' to a clear vision of 'what you want to do' may actually lead to weaker academic performance and a narrowing of educational possibilities. On the other hand, more flexible border crossing social 'floaters' who appear to be less focused, practical and serious appear to be more likely to explore a broader range of educational, lifestyle and mobility options. While they are in the position to have a level of family support that supports the more open cosmopolitan, exploratory and entrepreneurial frames as opposed to narrower pragmatic, work focused and negative security frames, it is not impossible to imagine that schools can do things to help students achieve broader perspectives.

As Beck (2006) argues in *Cosmopolitan Vision*, we now live in a world where the local is transformed and enhanced by the global and the old either/or binaries are coming to be replaced by both/and combinations. We can, and must, live in many places at once. The longstanding problems of young people growing up 'on time' and making appropriate mobility decisions to save themselves from the lack of opportunities and the limited social network options in their communities has been complicated by the way that rural places themselves have been transformed by globalisation. Rural places then are changing as they are increasingly drawn into larger networks of production, consumption, migration and information exchange and this transformation continues to provide a measure of local opportunity in call centres, tourism and other services in what has been called the 'new rural economy'.

I think there may be hope in this analysis. I am suggesting that there is a crack in the sociological matrix described by both structural and more social psychologically oriented forms of educational analysis. As Prudence Carter (2006) and Bell Hooks (1994, 2003) have shown, the ability of some students to straddle boundaries between

different social groups allows for educational outcomes that resist the expected and that stretch these youth beyond the 'coherent and convenient'. These authors suggest that the metaphor of boundary crossing is a good one for thinking about how to encourage students to imagine for themselves how to live in spaces unlike those they encounter in their quotidian lives. By entering into the academic spaces described by Dews and Law (1994) as 'this fine place so far from home' these 'diverse' students actually transform the nature of academic spaces and discourse within them. I believe the best way to achieve this new cosmopolitan space is in the inclusive public school rather than in the exclusive, specialised, consumer-focused school of choice. In rural places the diverse public school is typically the only choice.

If there are no visible and invisible boundaries for our children to cross in school I fear that we will indeed continue to achieve the dismal vision sketched by the Marxist sociology of education. We are quickly moving to a place where diversity within schools is being replaced by diversity amongst schools. The erstwhile radical idea that the inclusive public school should be deconstructed into fragmented schools of choice has now become normal in urban United States and Canada. In effect, schools have become yet another instrument used by the middle classes to escape diversity. And what role has the Marxist sociology of education played in the whole process other than to reinforce the idea that significant change is impossible and that social divisions are written in stone? How has this sociology democratised the system and empowered longstanding victims? I have no clear answers to these questions, only hunches; but it seems to me that the point of a Marxist sociology of education is not to study schools but to change them.

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## CHILD & FAMILY BOOKS FROM POSTPRESSED



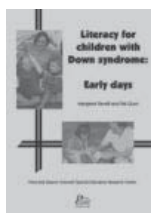
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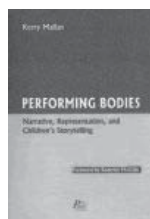
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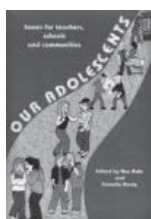
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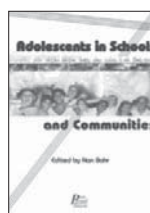
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