How does young people’s learning differ from that of children and older adults? This is an important question that guides much contemporary policy and practice within formal educational settings, and also in some of the other contexts in which young people learn – for example, in the workplace and through leisure pursuits. This chapter will suggest that the answer to this question is not clear-cut. Indeed, it will demonstrate, first, that there are important historical variations in the way that ‘young people’, as a group, have been conceptualised and understood within education and learning policy and, second, that there is considerable contestation, within contemporary discourse, about the extent to which this age group should be seen as distinct from others. In exploring these issues, the chapter draws largely, although not exclusively, on policy texts and other literature produced in the UK. However, as intimated at various points below, it is likely that similar arguments can be made with respect to education and learning policies in many other national contexts.

**Historical variations**

An analysis of policy documents and scholarly texts, published over the course of the twentieth century in the UK, attests to the different ways in which young people have been understood by policymakers and academics. These different understandings have had implications both for conceptualisations of how young people learn and the educational policies that have been thought to be necessary to support this learning. In 1927, the Consultative Committee of the Education of the Adolescent published its report (Board of Education, 1927). This document, known as the Hadow Report, emphasised the very particular educational needs of young people as they enter adolescence. Indeed, it claimed (p.xix) that:

There is a tide which begins to rise in the veins of youth at the age of eleven or twelve. It is called by the name of adolescence. If that tide can be taken at the flood, and a new voyage begun in the strength and along the flow of its current, we think that it will ‘move to fortune’. We therefore propose that all children should be transferred, at the age of eleven or twelve, from the junior or primary school either to schools of the type now called secondary, or to schools (whether selective or non-selective) of the type which is now called central, or to senior and separate departments of existing elementary schools. Transplanted to new ground and set in a new environment, which should
be adjusted, as far as possible, to the interests and abilities of each range and variety, we believe that they will thrive to a new height and attain a sturdier fibre.

As can be seen from this quotation, it was thought necessary to separate physically those above the age of 11 or 12 from younger pupils, and to provide for them a ‘new environment’ to cater for their specific adolescent needs.

This theme, of the age-specific educational needs of young people, was developed more fully in the Spens Report, which was published 11 years later (Board of Education, 1938). In the Introduction to this report, the authors explain the relationship between the two documents, and the importance they place on separating out what they consider to be the different phases of education:

This Report is the third of a series in which we develop the theme of our Report on The Education of the Adolescent. In that Report we visualised the education of the boy or girl as a continuous process, but conceived it as developing through two successive periods to which we gave the names of ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’; and we laid down the broad lines for a new advance in the general scope of our national system of education. In our Reports on The Primary School (1931) and on Infant and Nursery Schools (1933), we dealt with the special problems and opportunities of self-contained schools for children in the primary period of education which ends at the age of 11+. We now return to the education of boys and girls in the secondary period which begins at that age.

(Board of Education, 1938: xvii–xviii)

The Spens Report then specifies in considerable detail a large number of physical and mental changes which, the authors contend, are characteristic of adolescence and to which educators and policymakers must be sensitive. The following quotations are illustrative:

A new and very varied self-consciousness is one of the most salient characteristics of adolescent boys and girls, and we would point out that it provides one of the most ready means for moulding their moral character.

(Board of Education, 1938: 362)

We consider that the group of impulses broadly described as curiosity which emerge at this period may offer a powerful handle for intellectual instruction. If curiosity be encouraged rather than repressed, then the pupil’s own insistent questions and inquiries may often furnish valuable hints for the lines which school instruction and school methods may usefully follow. This is one reason for applying a heuristic procedure within reasonable limits to the principal subjects of the curriculum.

(Board of Education, 1938: 361)

Assumptions about the special requirements of this age group are implicit in these observations, and explicit at other points in the report:

The prime duty of a school providing secondary education is to cater for the needs of children who are entering and passing through the stage of adolescence, giving the pre-adolescent and adolescent years a life which answers to their special needs and brings out their special values.

(Board of Education, 1938: 363)

Although this strongly age-differentiated view of the learning needs of young people tended to dominate thinking in the UK in the 1920s and 1930s, academic and policy texts from later on in the twentieth century paint a rather different picture. Writing in 1966, for example, Musgrove (1966) argued that there were no
essential characteristics of young people in the 14 to 18 age range; instead, it was the differences between them that warranted more attention from both academics and policymakers. Moreover, he maintained that schools needed to enable young people to come into contact with a wide range of other people, especially those of different ages – including children and adults from the wider community (not just teachers and family members). Furthermore, he argued that those who were less academically-inclined could, through their school, be involved with adults in part-time work: ‘Under such conditions the young will not mark time in an artificially induced immaturity. The fifteen-year-old is not a child, although our present social arrangements are remarkably successful in making him [sic] appear like one’ (p. 144). As part of his more general argument that there was very little intrinsic to a specific, age-defined period of ‘youth’ that education needed to protect, he maintained that, over time, social policy would continue to offer more to an increasing age range of young people.

The history of education in the UK would seem to support Musgrove’s position. The raising of the age until which young people are expected to remain in education (or training) is perhaps evidence of the socially constructed nature of the end point of ‘youth’. Contrary to the claims about the specific developmental characteristics that underpin the ‘adolescent phase’ made explicit in the Spens Report, the raising of the school leaving age to 16 in 1972–73 and the legislation passed in 2008 to raise the ‘participation age’ 1 to 17 from 2013 and 18 from 2015 suggest that learning policy has been guided more by the external demands of the economy and changing norms about the position of young people in society, rather than any essential biological determinants. Indeed, Cowan (2010) has suggested that changes to the age at which young people are able to leave school can be seen as evidence of the ‘institutionalisation’ of youth identity. The importance of policy processes and political decisions in shaping our understanding of ‘youth’ should not be understated. Moreover, as Dwyer and Wyn (2001) note, one of the main effects of recent policy in Western societies has been to define young people primarily in terms of their status as students: ‘the alternatives to the completion of schooling which were taken for granted in the industrial era as part of the school-to-work transition have been called into question as a result of changes to the youth labour market in the restructured economy’ (pp. 37–38).

Contemporary policy perspectives

Particular understandings of ‘age’ continue to inform education policy and practice within contemporary society. Many European countries have a strong age-differentiated education system (Aapola, 2003). Throughout compulsory schooling, in the UK and many of its European neighbours, students typically learn alongside others of a very similar chronological age. As a result, young people and older learners rarely mix within schools and other educational institutions. Although further education colleges within the UK have typically been one of the few educational sites in which learners of different ages have been taught together, there has been some concern about the negative effects of even this limited ‘age-mixing’ on young people’s learning. In the following quotation from 2003, the then Minister for Lifelong Learning in the UK, Margaret Hodge, outlined what she saw as the important benefits of distinct educational provision for 16–19-year-olds:

We mean it should meet the particular pastoral, management and learning needs of this age group, wherever they learn. It is about creating a really distinct learning environment, clear and separate management and support arrangements which respond to young people as individuals at a time of complex transition in their lives. And it is about giving young people a clear base, separate management and tutor arrangements. Young people must know that their provision is managed by a team of people concerned exclusively with the quality of the offer to them and the success of young people in achieving their ambitions.

(Hodge, 2003: 5)
It is argued that one consequence of the strong age focus in much state policy in the UK – and particularly that relating to education and training – is that all sense of dynamic within the life course is lost: ‘each age group or age grouping … becomes static and membership within each group is frozen, so that within each age group, no process is involved – all sense of process is channelled into the transition from one age grouping to another’ (Jones and Wallace, 1992: 148–49). Moreover, in line with some of the arguments made above, Jones and Wallace (1992) contend that such an age focus also tends to overlook the considerable differences – and different life experiences – of young people of the same chronological age (for example, their gender, ethnicity, social class and geographical location).

Research that has focussed on the perspectives of teachers and learners rather than policymakers has, however, revealed different conceptualisations and understandings of distinctions by age (Brooks, 2005; McNair et al., 2003). Although both staff and students in the six institutions across the UK involved in McNair et al.’s (2003) study thought that there were important, age-related distinctions between groups of ‘older’ and ‘younger’ learners, these were rarely thought to correlate well with chronological age. Indeed, chronological age was considered to be a poor proxy for other, more profound changes in one’s life that may affect the process of learning. Instead, a variety of other markers were believed to be significant. Some of these related to traditional transitions to adulthood (for example, engaging in full-time work and moving out of the parental home), but other markers were also introduced, including having already had some experience of post-compulsory education. The findings from this study tend to support Aapola’s (2002) contention, based on her own work in Finland, that young people’s constructions of age rarely conform to the discourse of ‘institutional age’ (i.e. the standardised definitions of chronological age within particular social institutions) and are, instead, commonly located within a range of different discourses relating, for example, to physical appearance and conduct, how old one feels, and age-related symbols and rituals.

Furthermore, in contrast to the assumptions of Hodge and other policymakers who have placed emphasis on the distinctiveness of young people’s learning, and the need to ensure that they learn within protected and age-segregated spaces, the respondents in Brooks’s (2005) and McNair et al.’s (2003) research – almost without exception – believed that significant benefits accrued from integrating learners of different ages. Some of these were pedagogical in nature – for example, providing a wider range of life experiences and skills from which the class or learning group could draw, and offering positive messages about the value of education and learning throughout the life course. Others were more socially-oriented:

The most commonly cited ‘wider benefit’ of mixed-age groups was that such groups prepared students well for other parts of their life in which they would be likely to mix with people of a different age. It was felt that working with older or younger students not only helped to overcome age-related stereotypes but helped learners to develop interpersonal skills that could be used in other contexts, and particularly in the workplace. In contrast, other respondents pointed to the age-segregated nature of contemporary society and the divisions and misunderstandings between generations. In this context, many believed that mixed-age learning could play an important role in helping to increase inter-generational understanding and respect.

( Brooks, 2005: 65)

Thus, this research on the perspectives of learners suggests that, while learning policy, with respect to young people, continues to be informed, to some extent at least, by various age-related assumptions, these do not necessarily determine the way in which young people themselves (and older learners) understand either ‘youth identity’ or interactions between students of different chronological ages.

‘Transitions’ and learning in the lives of young people

Similar debates about the nature of young people’s learning emerge within the contemporary academic literature. The concept of ‘transition’ has come to be associated with the educational pathways taken by
young people and, in particular, their movement out of compulsory education and into further or higher education and/or full-time work (e.g. Ball et al., 2000; Brooks, 2009; Heinz, 2000; Hollands, 1990) and has underpinned much educational policy, certainly in Western countries, and in various other nations as well (see, for example, Tagoe, 2009). This relates to assumptions about the more general ‘transitional’ nature of young people’s lives at this time, as they move from childhood to adulthood. Indeed, within youth studies, transitions to adulthood have typically been seen as encompassing movement: from the parental home into independent living accommodation; from one’s ‘family of origin’ into new relationships and family formations; and from full-time education into full-time employment. The concept gained particular prominence in many Western countries during the early 1980s, with the collapse of the youth labour market, increasing youth unemployment and greater numbers of young people staying on in education (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001).

The concept has, however, been subject to significant critique over recent years (for example: Cohen and Ainley, 2000; Coles, 2000; Wyn and Woodman, 2006). Stokes and Wyn (2007) suggest that there are three main reasons why the term is seen as problematic. First, they argue that it conflates social and developmental processes. By this, they mean that, as the term transition is used to describe the process of moving from one phase of life (childhood) to another (adulthood), it tends to draw, either explicitly or implicitly, on psychosocial theories of development (in many ways akin to some of the assumptions of the Spens Report discussed above). This, they contend, ‘privileges the idea of youth as a (universal) developmental phase, and inevitably either ignores or underestimates the significance of social meanings and experiences of age’ (p. 497). They go on to argue that this approach is hard to reconcile with the increasing diversity of experiences of young people in their teenage years and early 20s and also the increasingly permeable nature of young people’s lives, where many engage in paid work well before they leave full-time education, and may continue to juggle formal learning and paid work for considerable periods of time. Indeed, Stokes and Wyn (2007) claim that the conflation of social and developmental understandings of youth ‘only serve to mask the extent to which young people engage in adult practices incrementally and early, across many dimensions of their lives’, not only in education (pp. 497–98).

The second problem with the concept of ‘transition’ is, Stokes and Wyn (2007) suggest, the assumption of linearity upon which it is often based. They argue that, by giving such priority to the transition from school (or other full-time education) to work, many policymakers overemphasise the linearity of this movement and ignore much of the complexity and chaos that often accompanies it. The concept also tends to assume that the fields of learning and work are entirely separate, thus ignoring the now considerable literature that attests to the importance of both paid employment and full-time education in the lives of many young people (Brooks, 2006) and the way in which formal learning is very likely to continue into, or be picked up again in, later adulthood. Indeed, this is a point that is developed by Quinn (2010) in her research on ‘failed transitions’ to higher education. She has suggested that the understanding of transition, upon which many policy texts are predicated, which sees it as a ‘fixed point on a path without deviation’ (p. 127) is inherently unhelpful. Instead, she argues that policymakers and scholars need to recognise the transitional nature of much learning across the lifecourse, and the way in which learners (old as well as young) move across and between a great many different learning contexts, often returning to some they have inhabited previously. This leads Quinn to proffer a different understanding of ‘transition’:

we need to change the terms of the discussion and recognise that the concept of transition itself does not fully capture the fluidity of our learning or our lives. Transition, as dominantly conceptualised, implies moving from one state, strata or location to another. The individual goes through a change and becomes different because of the external event. This is too static a viewpoint. We constantly change, we transform and we move backwards and forwards, we do not coalesce either before or after even the most momentous life crisis.

(Quinn, 2010: 127).
Here, there seems little to distinguish the movement of young people in and out of higher education, for example, from that of older adults (returning to the university or other sites of learning) later in life.

While some scholars, like Quinn, have pointed out the strong commonalities between the transitions made by young people and those of older adults, other researchers have contended that the concept of transition is also meaningful in the lives of young children, and can offer considerable analytical purchase in understanding their educational movements. Hughes et al. (2010): for example, explore the daily transition between home and school made by primary school children in the UK. They argue that, while this transition may seem mundane and commonplace, it raises fundamental questions about the differential attainment of different groups of children and about educational inequalities more broadly. Their data suggests that most children feel different in the two locations (school and home), but that the extent and nature of this dissonance is affected by social class, ethnicity and the cultural resources available to children within the home and school. There is also a reasonably large literature that focuses on transitions from primary to secondary school; this is wide ranging and addresses issues related to, for example, choice of secondary school (James and Beedell, 2010), effective pedagogical practice (Hunt et al., 2008; Lawrence et al., 2004), and the attitudes of children as they move between the two stages of their education (Weller, 2007; West et al., 2010; Zeedyk, 2003). This body of work raises a number of questions about the emphasis placed by many scholars and policymakers on the centrality of ‘school-to-work’ transitions, and the often-assumed linearity in such transitions.

The third way in which Stokes and Wyn (2007) critique the notion of transition is by pointing to some of its normative assumptions. These, they suggest, are linked to the linearity discussed above, and also to the conflation of social and developmental processes. They argue that ‘the normative framing of the concept of transition creates expectations that by a particular stage (and age) young people should have achieved a particular milestone or reached a particular level’ (pp. 498–99). Young people who do not conform to these expectations are often problematised and assumed to have failed educationally. Quinn’s (2010) work provides some empirical support for this, showing how young people who do not complete a higher education course in their early 20s are often assumed to have ‘failed’. She argues that, instead, policymakers (and other stakeholders) should change their perspectives and practices – and recognise the benefits to some students of leaving a degree programme early. Moreover, she advocates the adoption of a lifelong learning framework, within which movement in and out of higher education throughout life is facilitated.

The critique developed by Stokes and Wyn (2007) leads them to the conclusion that the concept of transition does little justice to the complexity of young people’s lives and, thus, should be abandoned by both scholars and policymakers. However, not all researchers share this analysis. Shildrick and MacDonald (2007): for example, agree with much of Stokes and Wyn’s analysis. Nevertheless, drawing on their own work with disadvantaged young people in the UK, they argue that the concept of transition remains useful, viewing it as ‘a necessary heuristic’. For them, the period of youth is necessarily transitional (being neither the first nor the last life stage). They write:

Youth, despite the changes that have recast transitions, is still a critically important period in which life changes are established and through which society is reproduced in familiar or different forms. The appeal of a broad, holistic, long view of youth transitions is that it offers a privileged vantage point from which to glimpse processes of social structural formation and transformation.

(Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007: 601)

Thus, in their analysis, a focus on youth transitions does not necessarily imply the conflation of social and developmental processes or assumptions about linearity. Instead, it provides a lens through which to investigate: the nature of young people’s lives; how they are responding to changes in the economy and
Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which policymakers and researchers have understood young people as learners. By drawing on both historical and contemporary policy texts, it has suggested that the assumptions made about young people and their learning needs have not remained constant over time. While the Spens Report of 1938 argued clearly for age-segregated educational provision to meet the very specific needs of the adolescent, subsequent debates about raising the school leaving age have indicated the malleable and often socially-constructed boundaries to the period of ‘youth’. The chapter has also demonstrated the ways in which, despite some evidence pointing to the ‘institutionalisation’ of youth identity, understandings of young people as learners are often contested between different groups at one point in time. The discussion about learning provision for 16–18-year-olds in the twenty-first century, for example, provided evidence of how ‘official’ assumptions about the distinct needs of young learners were frequently disputed by young people themselves.

The chapter has suggested that similar debates also infuse the academic literature. The notion of ‘transition’ has, since the second half of the twentieth century, frequently been used to conceptualise the movement made by young people from education into work, and for assessing the quality of the education they receive as a preparation for employment. Implicit in the use of this term is an assumption that the learning undertaken by young people at this point in their lives is rather different from that experienced at earlier periods in their education, or that with which they may engage at later points in life. The emphasis on preparing for the future and for moving from formal education into the world of work is often held to be distinguishing features of learning at this time of life. However, as outlined above, the concept of transition has recently been critiqued for: conflating social and developmental processes; assuming linearity; and making normative assumptions about young people’s lives. The literature has also raised important questions about the extent to which ‘transitions’ are unique to this phase of life, pointing to ways in which learning undertaken at other ages can also be strongly focussed on preparing for the future, and/or moving into (new forms of) employment. Nevertheless, while the criticisms made are helpful in focussing attention on the changing and increasingly complex lives of young people, they do not necessarily invalidate the concept of transition. As Shildrik and MacDonald (2007) have suggested, retaining a ‘broad, holistic, long view of youth transitions’ offers a ‘privileged vantage point’ from which to investigate aspects of both stability and change in young people’s lives. It also helps us to explore some of the changing constructions of youth – across both time and space – discussed in the earlier parts of this chapter.

Note

1 Young people will not necessarily have to remain in school until 18 as a result of this legislation. As an alternative to staying on in full-time education at school or college, they will be able to pursue work-based learning, such as an apprenticeship, or part-time education or training, if they are employed, self-employed or volunteering for more than 20 hours per week.

References

——(1938) Report of the Consultative Committee on Secondary Education with Special Reference to Grammar Schools and Technical High Schools (The Spens Report), London: HMSO.