London Review of Education
Vol. 9, No. 2, July 2011, 175–189

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Joining the big society: am I bothered?

Geoff Hayward[a]* and Richard Williams[b]

[a]*University of Leeds, Leeds, UK;* [b]*Chief Executive, Rathbone, Manchester, UK*

This contribution takes the form of a reflective essay informed by 15 years of working and undertaking research with young people at risk of social exclusion and non-participation in the post-compulsory education and training system in the UK. In particular, it draws upon our experience of working with young people, youth workers and other adults in the 'Engaging Youth Enquiry' undertaken as part of the Nuffield 14–19 Review. This research challenges two key policy assumptions: raising aspirations will lead to increased educational engagement and attainment and thereby reduced social exclusion; and that an alternative more 'vocational' curriculum will improve young people's life chances. The work indicates a clear need to pay much greater attention to opportunity structures in thinking through policy interventions to support young people's transitions to the labour market.

Keywords: disadvantaged youth; aspirations; NEET; youth policy

The Nuffield 14–19 Review (Pring et al. 2009) characterised the UK's post-compulsory education system, compared to our European neighbours, as having medium levels of participation with high rates of attrition from 16–19. The outcome is a significant proportion of young people described as being 'Not in any Education, Employment or Training' (NEET). While this is a statistical residual category, and its meaning and significance is questioned (Yates and Payne 2006), the size of this group of young people serves as a policy bellwether of how well the education and training system is performing in terms of supporting young people to make a successful transition from school and college to a working life that can pay a family-sustaining wage. Thus the term has significant symbolic and political meaning even if its sociological meaning is questionable. Policy directed at meeting the aim of reducing the proportion of young people NEET has been continually revamped but, we would argue, with little questioning of underlying assumptions or the policy theory that drives NEET reduction initiatives. Our purpose here is therefore to question such assumptions.

The nature of the NEET problem

The NEET category was formally created by the Social Exclusion Unit in 1999. This label refers to 16- to18-year-olds who – due to their 'NEET' status – are at risk of not making a future successful and sustainable transition to education, employment or training. Young people in this category had been a growing policy concern since the late 1970s and early 1980s, largely as a result of the collapse of the youth labour market, increasing rates of youth unemployment and crime, and disturbances in inner city areas, such as the

*Corresponding author. Email: G.F.Hayward@leeds.ac.uk

ISSN 1474-8460 print/ISSN 1474-8479 online
© 2011 Institute of Education, University of London
DOI: 10.1080/14748460.2011.585877
http://www.informaworld.com

Toxteth riots. Attempts to cope with burgeoning youth unemployment focused on apparent deficiencies in skills, attitudes and aspirations of young people that supposedly acted as barriers to their entry into the labour market. Coupled with changes in access to benefits and the definition of what counted as being unemployed as a young person during the 1980s and 1990s, there emerged a range of programmes, such as the Youth Opportunities Programme (YOP) and the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) that France (2007) described as conditioning young people to accept the new economic order.

Initial analyses of the problems facing young people trying to gain a foothold in the labour market at the beginning of New Labour's term of office recognised the complicated, heterogeneous and dynamic nature of the newly coined NEET group (see SEU 1999; Bynner and Parsons 2002). However, policy directed at such young people needed to fit with the emerging political discourses about the causes and remedies of social exclusion (itself a slippery and inherently problematic concept). Levitas (2005) argues that New Labour policy in this area was a complex amalgam of a 'moral underclass discourse… which centres on the moral and behavioural delinquency of the excluded themselves; and a social integrationist discourse whose central focus is on paid work' (7).

Being NEET became increasingly construed as the undesirable product of 'educational under-achievement, long-term unemployment, low aspiration and social exclusion' (Yates et al. 2010, 2). A succession of policy documents (inter alia DfES 2002, 2005; HM Treasury 2007; Cabinet Office 2008; Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009) characterised the key problem as being one of low aspiration with a need to engage young people in positive activities that would raise their aspirations. This, so the policy theory posited, would in turn raise educational engagement and attainment thereby enabling more young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds to enter 'middle class' and professional occupations thereby enhancing social mobility and reducing disadvantage. To achieve this required interventions that built what Putnam (1995) termed 'bridging social capital' – diverse networks of contacts outside a young person's immediate community and social contacts. While social bonding capital was seen as being high in deprived communities, 'bridging social capital' was viewed as low leading to low aspirations and expectations (Cuthbert and Hatch 2009, 1):

> Our enquiry finds that certain community characteristics are associated with low educational aspiration – such as close knit social networks, a sense of isolation from broader opportunities and a history of economic decline. High levels of bonding social capital and low levels of bridging social capital can restrict young people's horizons and access to opportunities.

Mentoring programmes represent one such intervention intended to raise expectations (Bartlett 2009; Colley 2003). In addition, early intervention programmes such as Sure Start, the Children's Fund, and the Every Child Matters agenda were intended, in part, to disrupt the trajectories of disadvantaged children towards NEET status, given that such trajectories begin early in the life course (Edwards et al. 2006; Gorard and Rees 2002). The Educational Maintenance Allowance, Activity and Learning Agreement Pilots (now all being discontinued), and a host of other initiatives provided policy instruments that were intended to encourage young people to stay in some form of education and training beyond the age of 16. Such participation, it was hoped, would build their identity capital (Côté 1996) – 'comprising educational, social and psychological resources' (Bynner and Parsons 2002, 289) – raising aspirations and increasing the chances of making a sustained transition into work.

To facilitate participation there has also been an ongoing process of new qualification design. This in many ways mirrors the pre-vocational curriculum reforms of the 1980s in the UK embodied in qualifications such as the Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE). Post-16 there is considerable continuity between these earlier development and newer ideas, such as General National Vocational Qualifications and Diplomas, for example a focus on transferable skills in areas such as communication and problem solving variously named core, key and now functional skills. This is the hallmark of what might be termed the vocationalism that emerged from the Great Educational debate following James Callaghan's 1976 Ruskin College speech (see Holt 1987 for a critique of the initial wave of vocationalism and pre-vocationalism in England). The Teaching Matters white paper (DfE 2010) and the Review of Vocational Education (DfE 2011a) perhaps mark the end of the second wave of vocationalism in a manner analogous to the introduction of the National Curriculum following the 1988 Education Reform Act.

Despite all of this well intentioned policy work, progress in reducing the proportion of young people NEET has been very slow. Figure 1 shows the trends in the proportion of young people classified as 'NEET', the 'NEET' rate, in England between 1985 and 2009. The 'NEET' rate was much higher in the 1980s than currently, reflecting the rapid economic downturn that occurred in the 1970s across the UK and the much lower staying on rate in post-compulsory secondary education. This resulted in a sharp decline in the size of the youth labour market, with a greatly reduced capacity to absorb young people with few if any qualifications into low skilled jobs.

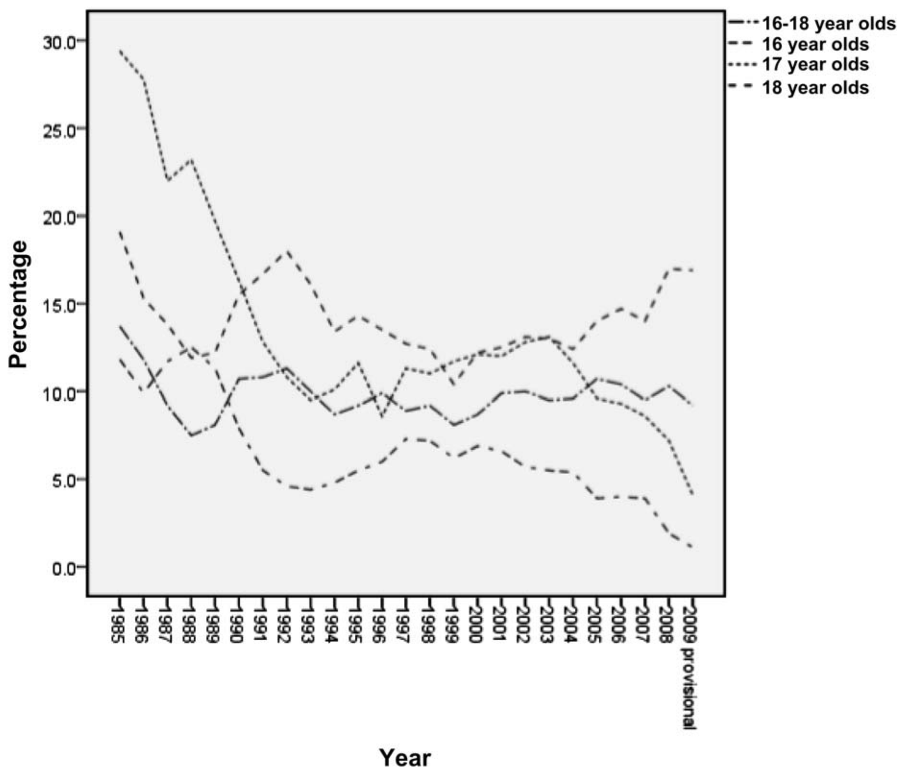

Figure 1. The percentage of 16-, 17- and 18-year-old NEET, 1985–2009.

The apparent stability of the proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds after about 1997 identified as being NEET masks two important underlying dynamics of the population. First, the proportion of young people described as being NEET is the product of a shifting equilibrium between decisions of young people to stay on in education and training and the availability of work for teenagers. Collectively those not in education or training (NET) consist of individuals who are described as being in Jobs without Training (JWT), jobs that do not provide training leading to accredited qualifications – i.e., qualifications included in the Ofqual Database (see Quinn, Lawy, and Diment 2008 for a discussion of this group) – and those who are NEET. If the proportion of those in JWT falls as young people decide to stay on in school sixth forms and colleges, participation rates in education may rise while the proportion remaining NEET remains fairly constant. This appears to be what has happened over the last decade or so.

> Despite participation in education and training amongst 16–18 year olds rising consistently since 2003, causing the size of the NET group to fall, the proportion of the cohort who are NEET has remained broadly stable since 2003 (at around 10% ± 1%). This is because the increase in the proportion of 16–18 year olds in education and training (+ 6.8 percentage points since 2003) has been counter-balanced by a fall in the proportion of 16–18 year olds in employment (-15.6 percentage points since 2003). The overall effect is for the NEET rate to remain stable because around half of the drop in employment reflects a shift from young people being both in employment and education to being in education full-time. (DfE 2011b, 2)

Second, while the proportion of 16- to 18-year-olds who are NEET in England has fluctuated around the 10% mark from 2003 onwards, this disguises major changes in the proportion of each age group who find themselves NEET (Figure 1). From 2003–2009 the proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds classified as being NEET fell but this is offset by an increase in the proportion of 18-year-olds who find themselves NEET.

The reason that the proportion of 16-year-olds who are 'NEET' has fallen over recent years is that more have opted to stay in full-time education. However, the upward trend in the 'NEET' figures with age suggests the possibility at least that this welcome engagement with further education and training may not lead to sustainable progression to employment for 18-year-olds. The 'shifting' of young people who are classified as 'NEET' to the older cohort of 18-year-olds shows one of the potential limitations of the proposed legislation to raise the age of compulsory participation to 17 (by 2013) and 18 (by 2015), as this may simply shift the processes through which young people enter the 'NEET' category to a later stage in a young person's life, but not actually equip them to deal with difficult transitions to sustainable employment and economic well being any better.

The sheer difficulty of reducing the proportion of young people who are NEET should, at the very least, require a re-examination of the assumptions that underpin policy in this area. In particular, the idea that low aspirations – the goals young people set for the future, their inspiration and motivation to work towards these goals (Cuthbert and Hatch 2009) – is a key determinant of entering the NEET category because aspiration mediates engagement with schooling and educational attainment, and that raising aspiration is therefore a 'magic bullet' for preventing this outcome, needs to be examined.

This is not to deny the statistically robust findings that 'teenage aspirations in combination with educational attainments are a major driving force in the occupational development of young people and that they mediate the effects of socioeconomic background factors' (Schoon and Parsons 2002, 262). Rather, we suspected that there was a much more complex interaction going on between young people's perspectives on their lives and circumstances, the institution of schooling and wider opportunity structures (Roberts

2009) that can be understood through quantitative analyses of extant data sets or that have been revealed through the standard qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews with young people.

Methodological considerations

The methodological challenges of generating valid insights into and understanding about the lives of disadvantaged young people are significant. Simply establishing a sampling frame is problematic since the available means of categorising the population of young people of interest rest on the use of slippery concepts such as 'disadvantage' and 'social exclusion' (Levitas 2005). 'NEET', for example, is simply a descriptive statistical residual category: the 16- to 18-year-olds who remain after others have been assigned to other categories. It is a highly problematic construct to operationalise for research purposes (Furlong 2006; Yates and Payne 2006). Furthermore, only including in a sample those young people who neatly fall into the 'NEET' category risks missing others who do not fit neatly into the dualistic language that often permeates youth transition research (Roberts 2011); the heterogeneity of the population of young people of concern (Payne 2000; Furlong 2006); and the often rapid flow of young people of interest between categories, for example from NEET, to employment, to training, and back to NEET again. This is part of the experience of the young people of interest in this paper and the sample has to be drawn widely enough to capture the nature of that experience.

The methodology adopted for the Engaging Youth Enquiry followed a logic outlined by Finlay et al. (2010) that took account of the difficulties of interviewing young people likely to demonstrate challenging behaviour (Curtis et al. 2004). It was intended to provide the young people with choice about how to engage with the research and explore their life stories by prioritising the need to help young people to develop narratives that they wished to share about aspects of their lives, experiences, perceptions and aspirations (see Sweenie 2009). Such an approach employs different types of communication tools, visual aids and a variety of props offering a concrete and tactile rather than an abstract experience, and the opportunity for participants to shape the agenda (Beresford 1997; Ward 1997; Berson and Meisburger 1998; Thomas and O'Kane 2000; Hill et al. 2004).

This research utilised one-day workshops rather than the three days of intensive activity employed by Finlay et al. (op. Cit.) in order to work with more groups of young people. During the course of that day young people were engaged in a range of activities, for example drawing maps and pictures of where they lived, and participating in small discussion groups which encouraged them to reflect on their experiences of school, home and their community; explore their aspirations and hopes for the future; and their current activities. Adults the young people knew and trusted, such as youth workers and Connexions staff facilitated these groups, to increase the likelihood of producing engagement and authentic narratives.

Young people were selected by the youth workers and Connexions staff on the basis of the perceptions of these adults about the willingness of the young person to participate. This was therefore a purposive sample which assembled geographically spread groups of young people that the research team considered we could learn the most from about their life circumstances, histories, experiences and aspirations. Such a sample is inevitably biased since certain groups of young people, who were not in contact with either youth workers or Connexions staff, could not be included.

Data was collected in the form of detailed notes as recording was felt likely to inhibit the flow of conversation and the unfolding of stories. These notes were made by an

observer, either a researcher from the Nuffield 14–19 Review or a member of Rathbones' staff. In total 36 such workshops were held each with 8–10 participants (though some did not show up on the day). Nonetheless, the data corpus reflects the views of more than 300 young people spread across the UK from the Welsh valleys to inner city Scotland; from the old pit villages of Northumbria to the east end of London.

Analysis followed Wolcott's (1994) three suggested stages: describe, analyse and interpret. The notes from each meeting were initially written up as a descriptive coherent report with some verbatim quotation to illustrate key points. The data from each meeting, which also included artefacts such as drawing produced by the young people, were then analytically organised around themes such as experiences of schooling, experiences of transition, and the role of significant adults in young people's lives that were either developed from the data or gleaned from the literature. The internal validity of this analysis was checked through a collaborative process of reading all the data and re-reading the emerging thematic account for each site. These emergent themes were then synthesised together in a collaborative process of interpretation. As with Finlay et al. (op. cit., 859) this required 'regular and repeated review of the analysis and conclusions across the entire team'.

In addition to the youth workshops, five one-day practitioner workshops were held in Wales, Manchester, London (x2) and Scotland. Each was facilitated by two core members of the research team as open dialogues guided by a series of topics. An additional member of the research team kept detailed notes of the meetings. Each workshop contained practitioners from a diversity of backgrounds (such as Connexions, magistrates, voluntary sector organisations, school and college representatives, researchers, employers, and youth offending teams). The open dialogues were characterised by high levels of dissonance between the views of practitioners from different backgrounds which fed back into the development of the ongoing discussion. Again a descriptive report was written up for each of these workshops and analysed to produce emergent themes. Cross-case analysis was then used to synthesise these emergent themes together.

While adopting a more creative qualitative approach with both the young people and the practitioners who worked with them was productive there are clearly limitations. First we are not working with representative samples which limits the external validity of the claims made about young people and their lives. Second, the data corpus does contain multiple perspectives on the life circumstances, hopes and aspirations of young people but these are open to multiple interpretations, i.e., the data are inherently ambiguous in the way that data from a well-conducted survey, for example, are not. This was reflected in the struggle within the research team to reach consensus over the interpretation of the data and produce the emergent themes. This places an onus on the researchers to persuade 'the audience that the findings are legitimate' (Finlay et al. op. cit., 856).

Aspirations: what young people tell us

Policy-makers often construct the problem that they seek to solve in relation to NEETS (actual or potential) as one arising from a lack of aspiration. However, the perception of young people's aspirations, both among young people and the professionals who work with them on a daily basis, is not nearly so clear-cut. Practically all the young people involved in the workshops expressed aspirations for their future. These are often highly conservative however, illustrating the limited horizons of expectation noted by Hodkinson, Sparkes, and Hodkinson (1996). For example:

> I'd do my GCSEs again. Graphic designer. (M, 18)

> Engineering – cars. (M, 18)

> Home improvement business. (M, 17)

> Just want money. (M, 16)

> I just want a job, me, I'm not bothered what sort of job. (M, 16)

> Mechanic. (M, 17)

> Joiner. (M, 16)

> Have me own hair and beauty salon. (F, 16)

> Want to have a job and a nice family. Don't want to be living in this hole either. (M, 16)

> In a flat. In me own house with me own job. Paying me own bills, living a life by meself. (M, 16)

> Me own flat or house. (F, 16)

There were of course some who felt aimless but such comments were rare. Above all there was, among the vast majority of young people who participated in the Engaging Youth Enquiry workshops, an aspiration to work, to be economically independent of parents, to be productive. Yet, at the same time, these young people had all left the education system early. While they may have regretted this there was little attempt to construct a vision of the future for themselves that involved re-engaging with the education system. For example: 'Don't know. I've got no GCSEs, so I won't be doing what I want. And I don't want to go back to college' (M, 17).

It is difficult, therefore, to discern in the young people's stories a clear link between raising aspirations leading automatically to greater engagement with the education system. On the face of it this appears irrational: if these young people aspire to what seem to be achievable career goals one might expect them to see the value of schooling as a means of achieving those goals. However, such a view omits the young people's interpretations of the opportunity structures that they find themselves presented with. For example one young man expressed his career aspiration in terms of running a pub but then went on to say 'Can't see myself running that pub' (M, 17).

The participants in the practitioner workshops also indicated this linkage between aspiration and opportunity. For example:

> Actually, in the end, the young people are quite aspirational, and it is about provision and opportunity.

> I am finding more and more that young people have multiple disadvantages, and they have poverty of aspiration. There is an absolute and complete lack of hope. They see what is on offer in Manchester, but it is not accessible to them.

While the second quote draws the standard picture of a poverty of aspiration it also highlights a lack of hope, the result of appreciating what maybe on offer in a geographical

location may not be open to them. Furthermore, the practitioners who contributed to the Engaging Youth Enquiry identified more problems ensuing from aspirations which are too high relative to educational attainment, a factor echoed in quantitative analyses of the negative impact of mismatched aspiration and educational attainment (Yates et al. 2010). Overall, the issue of aspiration seemed on the basis of this evidence marginal relative to the issue of opportunity. A fundamental lesson that still needs to learned and embedded in youth policy is that it is a mistake to seek to raise or to raise aspirations when behind this proposition 'responsible adults' have either no intention or ability to match these with enhanced opportunities.

Rational actor theory (Goldthorpe 1996, 1998) predicts the behaviour of these young people well. As Roberts (2009, 364) argues from this theoretical standpoint:

> Applying this perspective to parents' and young peoples' ambitions, we find, first that the working class is actually more ambitious than the middle class relative to its start point. So there is no working class poverty of aspiration. Lower absolute levels of aspiration are explicable in terms of the high costs of aiming high, relative to the families' resources.

Given that making choices about which steps to take towards achieving an aspiration involves investment of various combinations of time, money and emotional resources (Beck 1992; Roberts 2009) those who have limited resources will have less available for such investment. Thus, while young people and their families may see opportunities available in the local labour market, and they may aspire to them, realising those opportunities requires risky investment, given limited resources (multiple disadvantages) in terms of continuing in the education system for example. Providing people with more resources seems the solution here rather than endlessly seeking to raise aspirations that cannot be achieved without such resources to invest or an opportunity structure that matches aspirations.

The issue then is perhaps less about raising aspirations, and more about providing the means to realise existing aspirations. The turn to vocationalism, as a means of providing a more engaging and practical form of learning, is one attempt to provide such an alternative means to engage young people. Something in which they will be prepared to invest, because they and their families may see the benefit more clearly in terms of future labour market opportunities.

The turn to vocationalism

There is nothing new about vocationalism in education (see Holt 1987; Grubb and Lazerson 2004). As with earlier incarnations of the phenomenon, many of the curriculum reforms of the last Government (at the time of writing, we are of course awaiting the new Government's vision of the vocational curriculum and its attendant qualifications structures) were proposed either as motivational devices for those assumed to be turned off by 'academic' learning or as measures to bridge the perceived gap between the readiness of (some) young people for work and their educational experience. The Diplomas, for example, were intended precisely to bridge the gap between aspiration and opportunity for those judged to be relative academic failures.

The resurgent fascination of senior politicians with vocationalism in the secondary phase of education was and remains in many respects an easy alternative to thinking more fundamentally and critically about the issue of educational purpose at a time when youth transitions to adulthood have never been more complex or more troubled. The whole faddish preoccupation with Diplomas was therefore part of the wider process by which the

education system at every stage has been subverted by crude notions of human capital theory: performativity as a substitute for educational purpose (Ball 2001).

The question of educational purpose was central to the Nuffield Review of which the Engaging Youth Enquiry was a part. Framed as two questions ('What constitutes an educated 19-year-old today?' and 'Are the models of education we have inherited from the past sufficient to meet the needs of all young people?'), the Review concluded that the issues of aims and values remained central an unanswered questions of national educational policy. Most specifically the Review drew attention to the disregard for the development of young people's emerging sense of well-being, resilience and self-esteem in an educational culture driven by performance.

The Engaging Youth Enquiry surfaced the personal narratives and reflections of those young people left most exposed by the performative preoccupations of the educational mainstream. The narratives of the young people in the frontline of these shifts in ideology and educational structures have a high degree of poignancy. Our work was with those who had failed in the extreme and who were the most challenged by, and challenging to, the educational mainstream. Yet they defined their aspirations for learning and life in conventional terms rather than in terms of the implied trajectories that adults were serving up to them by implication and in the form of low-level school–college link courses.

Reflecting back on their school careers and futures, the young people who talked with us did not visualise achieving their goals through increasing their proficiency in terms of functional skills or emotional intelligence couched in the language of soft skills. Nor did they articulate a burning regret at not having participated in learning leading to more vocational qualifications offered as providing a suitable alternative curriculum. Rather, they wanted to do maths, IT, French and English and other subjects. They wanted access to powerful knowledge (Young 2008) which they knew would help them get on: but they wanted access in ways that they found enjoyable, motivational and which respected them as young adults.

Achieving such access remains perhaps the greatest challenge facing the institution of schooling in England. Such knowledge is not just academic it can be vocational, but it is the vocational knowledge embedded in properly formed apprenticeship programmes or well established college-based vocational qualifications that matters. Such knowledge takes seriously the need to develop mathematics and an ability to express oneself fluently in English, and to develop general and critical knowledge, i.e., to participate in a proper general education.

It is surely ironic that at a time when the age of transition to the labour market is getting ever older, young people are being asked by those running the education system to give up the ability to acquire general and critical knowledge at an ever earlier age in order to make pseudo vocational choices. Young people are being offered such choices in the hope that they will engage their interest but the reality, in terms of entry to the labour market is that it may not be in their interest to invest time and resources into participating in such programmes (McIntosh 2002; DEMOS 2011; DfE 2011a). The poignancy in our research dealings with young people at the margins of the educational mainstream was in part that they understood all of these nuances about choice, opportunity and aspiration. Unfortunately for them, they also knew that they lacked voice and influence: their fates were not in their own hands.

The institution of schooling

The young people who worked with us while expressing clearly what was worth studying also expressed very pronounced feelings of alienation from schooling. Many young people

(though by no means all) had very unhappy memories of schooling, and in most cases they do not want to re-engage via an education route: they wanted a job. However, the reasons for dropping out were a function of a complex interaction between school as a site for learning and the learning opportunities being offered through, for example, alternative programmes and qualifications. There is certainly strong anecdotal and research evidence to suggest that alternative provision can engage young people's interest, and such opportunities has undoubtedly played a part in levering up participation rates post-16. However, while recognising this, the young people involved with the Engaging Youth Enquiry perceived the limited value of such learning opportunities in terms of making progress, a finding reflected in the Review of Vocational Education (DfE 2011a).

For many, the reason for dropping out, was not primarily about the school curriculum, or about a lack of vocational learning opportunities, but an inability to cope with the necessary authority structures that must underpin the structure of schooling. Some of the young people described a feeling of not being treated with respect. For example, a participant in Northumberland commented: 'Teachers – they talked to you on a different level, like they're higher up, treat you like a three-year-old' (Female, Northumberland).

A sense of being trapped inside an autocratic system was clearly of concern to some of the participants. The pressure the young people felt under, particularly in Year 11, generated part of the disillusionment with school. Those who were still attending at that point argued that there was too much work and too much pressure to complete that work against tight deadlines.

This is not to criticise teachers or to argue against the value of schooling for the majority of youngsters. The young people we work with are challenging – many will readily admit to poor behaviour at school and many are on the margins of gangs, which provide an alternative life style for them, a sense of belonging and an opportunity to be productive. However, some are affected by illness, or by caring responsibilities, which limit their ability to engage with schooling. Others, the majority, expressed an active dislike of their experience of schooling. For many, stopping going to school was a rational response, particularly if they had been told repeatedly that they were failures with little expected of them, both by schools and their families. They were failing on their own terms: ceasing to invest emotional resources and time in an activity that they felt had little intrinsic worth in achieving their aspirations. We have to recognise this as their lived experience of schooling in the design of initiatives to support them back into sustainable positive outcomes, and in giving teachers the resources to support them.

Conclusion

After 11 years of compulsory schooling most of the young people we have listened to over the last few years are united by their experiences of disadvantage, poverty, low self-confidence and a sense of hopelessness. Many are embedded in cultures of worklessness and casualised employment with low pay and poor prospects. Others are in care and have been for years, or are homeless. The solution to this nexus of complex issues continues to be: raise aspirations and prolong engagement with formal education and training in order to enhance young people's identity capital and promote their social mobility.

However, Government before and since Blair has increasingly and at times wantonly, confused or at best conflated 'aspiration' and 'opportunity'. Young people thus have a duty to aspire (to join in, get qualified, be bright, clean, punctual, sociable, engaged, willing and eager, to be ready) and this sense of implied duty is now enshrined in legislation as it affects education and 'youth' more generally. The self-evident disjuncture here is the absence of an

equivalent and legally enshrined duty to make opportunity available: that is the opportunity of real prospects for a secure, sustainable job which enables a modest lifestyle to be achieved involving property, family and independence. Young people see this disjuncture and they see it and feel it most directly in those parts of inner city Britain that are to all intents and purposes shut.

What Government's seem to be unwilling to acknowledge is the radically changed nature of opportunity structures as a result of the changing 'inter-relationships between family backgrounds, education, labour market processes and employer recruitment practices' (Roberts 2009, 355). Only 40 years ago 80% of young people left school at 15 with few if any qualifications. Some went into apprenticeship programmes or courses at the local technical college but the majority moved into low and semi-skilled jobs, primarily in manufacturing and mining. That world has gone. The manufacturing heartlands of Scotland, the north of England, the West Midlands and South Wales lost huge numbers of jobs during the economic downturn of the 1970s and 1980s. Of the 7.26 million jobs in the manufacturing sector in 1979, 2.8 million, 40%, had disappeared by 1992 with a major 'deterioration in the relative position of unskilled, blue-collar workers both in employment and earnings' (Hine and Wright 1998, 1510). Two industries that would have employed many lower attaining young people, coal and steel, were particularly affected. Between September 1981 and March 1994 British Coal's workforce declined by 260,000, 93%: 200,000 of these were miners and the remainder managers, clerical workers and other ancillary staff (Beatty, Fothergill, and Lawless 1997). The iron and steel industry, while becoming more productive, shed 100,000 jobs between 1976 and 1986 (Blyton and Bacon, 1997).

New jobs in the service sector are not evenly distributed across the country. The result is localised structural unemployment, which has a disproportionate impact on the young people in these areas. In addition, young people are particularly affected by economic downturns, especially those young people with few or no qualifications. The banking crisis induced recession of 2008 resulted in the loss of 500,000 jobs from the economy and a 6% reduction in GDP. These jobs are yet to be replaced. Technically the UK is no longer in recession but significant issues of macro structural unemployment remain. Aggregate levels of unemployment and worklessness continue to rise. Over one million people in the UK are also now reluctant part-time workers because their jobs were either shrunk or restructured to take account of falling demand. Critically, according to figures in the Labour Force Survey, some 60% of new jobs being created now are part-time. These changes are profound and reflect a long-term trend towards casualisation in the UK labour market. As Roberts (2009, 365) argues:

> Young people today are excessively ambitious relative to the jobs that the economy offers. There is a wealth of talent and a wealth of ambition, and an overall shortage of jobs, not least good jobs.

The issues surrounding young people at risk of becoming 'NEET' are then a product of long-term structural and economic change, which is just as much about employment, or rather structural unemployment, as it is about education and training. However, the discourse of low aspiration as *the* cause of the problems being faced by young people in making the transition to economically successful adult lives, individualises the problem of youth unemployment and declines to recognise the wider economic reality being faced by young people in many communities (Colley and Hodkinson 2001; Foster and Spencer 2011).

This of course highlights both the widening gap in terms of labour market disadvantage affecting those who are relatively low attaining at 16-plus and the fact that the State has

increasingly used the tertiary education system (school sixth forms, general further education and tertiary colleges, sixth form colleges) as a means to provide young people, who two or three generations ago would have transitioned effectively into the labour market at the end of compulsory schooling with alternative activities.

In many respects the use of the tertiary system for this purpose has been tantamount to a process of 'warehousing' young people for whom no other socially acceptable occupation can be found. The use of such a metaphor does not imply that young people are simply stacked up on shelves and left doing nothing. However, Wolf's recent Review of Vocational Education (DFE 2011a, 52) identified some 350,000 young people (i.e., 20% of the cohort aged 16–18 in England) across the tertiary sector whom were judged to be following courses described as vocational but which in practice are not. Further Wolf argues that whilst such provision fails in terms of job preparation it is also largely worthless as credit for achieving other significant academic progression or transition into work. It is therefore a moot point as to whether or not a very considerable swathe of post-16 provision, draining millions from the FE budget, has educational legitimacy. The essential point however is that on whatever basis of justification, most low level provision described across the sector as vocational fails young people to a very considerable degree on its own terms. It may be general education that is vocationally contextualised but it is most certainly not vocational education, and as such it contributes nothing either by way of preparing young people for work or in terms of incrementing the skills base of the population at large.

The growth of the pseudo vocational programme offer to which Wolf draws attention has had profound implications for the distortion of both funding and programme priorities. There has been a conflation in policy in which the principles and distinctions between work related education and work based training have been confused. Reluctant to engage with anything construed as job subsidy and reluctant too to subsidise employer based training, Government throughout the New Labour years favoured education and training providers as a qualifications (proxy for skills) supply chain. Wolf is challenging the sense of this approach and questioning fundamentally the ethics of turning young people out of the education system at 16, 17 and 18 with bagfuls of useless qualifications.

The Coalition Government has taken steps to downgrade much of what developed under New Labour as new qualifications to satisfy the post-Leitch Agenda. The Coalition however has yet to respond to Wolf's Report and it remains to be seen whether the new Government will take on the challenge of refocusing large parts of the education and training system such that both inputs and outputs increase significantly young peoples' job readiness and therefore prospects in a labour market which is increasingly skeptical of youth. The Government's current policy of investing in an expanded apprenticeship programme is certainly part of the answer. But apprenticeship expansion is increasingly the product of take up post-19 rather than expanding opportunities for young people 16–18 (DfE 2011a, 122, 164–9).

Apprenticeship is in any event only part of the answer. The young people with whom the Engaging Youth Enquiry was concerned were generally not apprenticeship ready to the extent that they could cope with academic and technical study at level 2 and beyond, and they were certainly not vocationally decided sufficient to make the necessary commitment to a particular trade or occupation. For these reasons, even if the issue of employer reluctance can be overcome, their remains considerable policy and programme development still to be done to create work relevant learning opportunities for young people that go beyond the present models which, until Wolf, have made a virtue of the systemic warehousing of young people.

The opportunity cost of such warehousing has been and continues to be hugely significant for the many thousands of young people who are conventionally low attaining but aspirant in terms of jobs and work opportunities. Too much time and effort has gone into developing qualifications at foundation level and level 1 which have no real currency outside of the self referential progression routes of educational providers, whilst far too little time and thought has been giving to the core issue of creating real credit worthy linkages between young people and the labour market. In the context of growing competition for lower skilled, entry-level jobs from both graduates and older people the significance of this issue for lower attaining young people who want jobs cannot be underestimated. It is too easy to talk of the new 'lost generation'; it is a lot harder to rise to the challenge of equipping this generation for life in a tough labour market.

Much of the New Labour apparatus to support its 14–19 strategy is being dismantled or refocused, in England at least, by the new Conservative–Liberal Democratic coalition. For example, the Education Maintenance Allowance was closed to new applicants from January 2011 and are now to be replaced with a new and more targeted bursary scheme to assist the most disadvantaged. The White Paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE 2010) heralded further reforms of the primary and secondary curriculum. This placed a renewed focus on academic curriculum subjects for all and, as indicated above, Wolf's Review of Vocational Education has raised fundamental questions of utility, curriculum and qualifications design in relation to core elements of the last Government whole 14–19 reform strategy. In terms of plans to raise the participation age, the new Government is proposing continuity at least in terms of intention, but appears very reluctant both to identify thresholds of attendance by which participation is to be judged and has said nothing about its intentions as to sanctions. A great deal of change in policy direction has been signaled but the substance of all of this remains to be seen.

One of the most significant shifts in the 14–19 landscape as it bears upon those most at risk is the emerging configuration of responsibilities and accountabilities as between statutory agencies (such as the YPLA, SFA/NAS), local authorities and providers. Where New Labour was obsessed with the need to join up services (planners, commissioners and providers) in ever more convoluted bureaucratic structures, the new Government is favouring the market. It remains to be seen whether or not those young people with the most complex learning and support needs are engaged more or less successfully as a result.

Notes on contributors

Geoff Hayward is Head of School and Professor of Education in the School of Education, University of Leeds. He was one of the directors of the Nuffield 14–19 Review and has been involved in working in and researching Vocational Education and Training for twenty years.

Richard Williams is Chief Executive of Rathbone, a charity that works with socially excluded and disadvantaged young people. Formerly an FE College Principal he is also a visiting research fellow at the University of Leeds, School of Education.

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