

## **Educational relationships outside school**

### ***Why access is important***

*Felicity Wikeley, Kate Bullock, Yolande Muschamp and Tess Ridge*

**This study examines educational relationships in out-of-school activities and their impact on young people's learning, comparing the experiences of impoverished young people with those of their more affluent peers.**

The relationship between poverty and lack of school attainment is well established but policy initiatives to address this have had only partial success. Conducting interviews with 55 young people, this research explores the opportunities that young people have for developing positive, focused educational relationships with adults through out-of-school activities.

Research shows that young people from low-income families participate in fewer of these activities than those from more affluent homes. The report examines the benefits of out-of-school activities for young people and their potential to improve engagement in school and educational outcomes.



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# Summary

## The study

This study examined the role of educational relationships in out-of-school activities and their impact on young people's learning. Its aim was to compare the experiences of young people who live in impoverished circumstances with those of their more affluent peers in order to explore implications for educational achievement.

The relationship between poverty and lack of school attainment is well established (Gregg *et al.*, 1999; HM Treasury, 1999; Ennals, 2005). Policy initiatives to address this have only met with partial success (Bradshaw, 2005) and many young people are still trapped in a cycle of deprivation, educational underachievement and failure. The research reported here was premised on the view that positive, focused educational relationships between teachers and pupils are likely to promote positive attitudes to school and learning which will ultimately lead to greater achievement. However, to successfully establish such relationships both pupils and teachers need highly developed interpersonal skills and understanding. The study explored the opportunities young people have for developing these skills in the educational relationships they experience out of school.

The study used mapping and interview techniques to address three questions:

- What do young people gain from engagement in out-of-school activities?
- Do young people from low-income families participate less in these activities than those from more affluent homes?
- If so what can be done to redress the added disadvantage that this creates for young people in low-income families?

Our sample comprised 25 young people in receipt of free school meals and attending schools in the South West of England. They were matched by 30 of their peers from the same schools, but living in more affluent circumstances. Twenty-six of the young people were in Year 6 (11 years old) and 29 were in Year 9 (14 years old).

# Findings

### ***What did the young people do?***

The young people reported a considerable range of out-of-school activities. These fell into two categories:

- organised groups run by adults on a regular basis and often focused on a specific activity
- spontaneous activities that the young people engaged in with their families and friends.

The activities we uncovered largely match those identified by the survey response to the *Youth Matters* consultation (DfES, 2006). Our qualitative approach allowed us to extend our understanding of the wider benefits of learning from these activities (Brynnner and Feinstein, 2006).

The rich seam of spontaneous activities was particularly noteworthy. Inevitably the young people spent a considerable amount of time with their friends and families. While time spent with family and friends was clearly fulfilling and, in most cases, formative and instructive, this was not the focus of the study. Our focus was the possible added value conferred by educational relationships that are beyond the everyday experiences of school and home. We see this as a specific, valuable (and possibly neglected) strand of educational experiences.

The main impetus for young people for joining in any organised out-of-school activity was social. The social advantages of wider networks were frequently stressed and seemed to be a positive influence on young people. The main reason for continued commitment was enjoyment of the activities themselves. However, in most cases parental support was also needed for continued membership.

### ***What did the young people learn?***

An analysis of the learning that took place within these organised activities revealed the value and richness of the participation and highlighted what was denied to those young people unable to take part. Two striking aspects of the young people's engagement with these out-of-school activities were, first, the ways in which they were making genuine contributions to the activities through the responsibilities

that they undertook, and second, their level of understanding and articulation of what they had learnt. From the interviews it was possible to see development of specialist vocabulary and skills and the evaluation and reward of these through local and national frames of assessment. Many activities had become such significant life experiences for the young people that they linked them to their future career aspirations.

Further analysis provided insights into the differences in the ways young people behaved in out-of-school activities and in the classroom. As the young people discussed their attitudes towards the management of behaviour, it became apparent that strict discipline was applied and maintained within many of these out-of-school settings. This was generally accepted without complaint and clearly differentiated from behaviour management strategies in school.

### ***The importance of educational relationships***

The relationships with the adults involved in the activity were a strong factor in continued participation. We identified two main roles for these adults:

- Supervisory – there was a distinction between single-activity out-of-school clubs and the less focused (but still organised) clubs and groups where the adult involvement is not ‘teaching’ but limited to a more peripheral, mainly supervisory role.
- Role models – in the single-activity out-of-school clubs the adults were a key element of the young people’s involvement. They were seen as role models and the young people aspired to the particular proficiencies which they attributed to these leaders. The adults contributed their expertise to the activity as opposed to their ‘adulthood’, and they were often perceived as fellow learners.

Whatever role the adult played in the activity, the relationship was always perceived as being very different from that with teachers in school, even when it was the same adult (e.g. teachers taking drama or sports clubs). Although the adults in the clubs could be strict and demanding they were much more likely to be described as friends and the predominant word used was ‘fun’ in relation to both the adults and the activities. Power was more evenly distributed as the young people saw the adult involvement, as well as their own, as voluntary. The adults were there because they wanted to share their own enthusiasm for the activity and not because they had a separate agenda to impose.

The conclusion we drew from these results was that these young people conceptualised the role of adults in the out-of-school activities and the role of adults as teachers in school in very different ways. Teachers in classrooms tended to be perceived as part of the system rather than as part of the activity itself. The adults in the out-of-school activities were perceived as co-learners and an integral part of the activity. This extended understanding of the role of adults in learning changed young people's perceptions of the task and character of teachers. Where out-of-school learning had impacted on learning in school it was because young people's relationship with teachers had been changed to a more equal interaction. The young people now saw themselves as active participants rather than as passive recipients of the curriculum.

### ***Impact of poverty***

The diversity and number of spontaneous activities reported was similar for both the free school meal and the more affluent groups but the list of organised activities revealed substantive differences between the type and quality of activities experienced. Of the 30 more affluent young people only six were not attending organised activities after school. For the young people on free school meals the numbers were considerably higher: 11 out of the 25 young people were not attending some organised after-school provision.

The data were further analysed by age, gender and location. While there were differences when considering age and location, there appeared to be very little gender difference.

In Year 6 there was a marked difference between the types of activities taken up by young people. While the more affluent young people were engaged in a variety of activities on the school site and beyond, the young people on free school meals were generally more reliant on school provision. In Year 9 the distinction between the two groups was starker. The more affluent young people were taking part in a rich and varied range of organised activities, but this was much more limited for the young people on free school meals.

More importantly, living in a rural location appeared to have a strong effect on uptake of out-of-school activities. Young people in poverty and living in rural locations were doubly disadvantaged. Only five out of the 13 young people on free school meals in rural locations took part in some form of out-of-school activity. This compared to nine out of the 12 young people on free school meals in urban locations and 15 out of the 18 more affluent rural young people. The problems of the rural young people on free

school meals mirrored those of other young people on free school meals but were exacerbated by fewer options and distance.

### ***Reasons for non-attendance***

The factors for non-attendance often overlapped and intensified each other. They formed a complex constellation of disadvantages which inhibited young people's opportunities and appetites for organised out-of-school experiences.

A key element was the availability, or perception of availability, of organised activities in the young people's schools and neighbourhoods. This was a complex issue linked to access and cost and the young people's perceptions of what was possible.

Transport was a key concern, affecting the young people's capacity to do things that their friends were doing. Some competitive activities required parents to take their children to matches further afield. This was particularly problematic for families where personal transport is restricted and therefore reciprocity between families is not possible.

Organised activities often involved extra costs such as entrance fees and equipment.

Involvement in family life and practices appeared to take additional time and commitment for the young people on free school meals. Many of these young people were living in complex and re-formed families, and time was spent with non-resident fathers and stepfamilies.

Where there were no affordable organised activities for the young people they were generally frustrated and disappointed. The lack of opportunities fuelled their perception of themselves as non-attendees. The young people on free school meals frequently claimed they did not want to engage in the same way as others although they were keen to talk about more spontaneous activities that they had chosen to do.

### **Implications for policy**

Our research informs policymakers who seek to relate learning to enhanced well-being (Brynner and Feinstein, 2005). Our findings have key messages for policies initiated in the green paper *Every Child Matters* (HM Treasury, 2003) and set out in *Youth Matters* (DfES, 2005b, 2006) and *Extended Schools* (DfES, 2005a). These are summarised in the following paragraphs.

- 1 Young people conspicuously benefit from the educational relationships they establish in organised activities out of school. Consequently, young people in poverty are disadvantaged by their relative inability to access such experiences. Assisting easy and equal access to out-of-school activities is an important starting point. Enabling such access through the provision of affordable clubs or concessionary transport could have a real influence on young people's engagement with learning.
- 2 Young people recognised the worth of the activity and expected to make some payment. If positive participation is to be sustained, access needs to be seen as a fair and valuable entitlement. It should not be considered an intervention for the disadvantaged. Older children's preferences for the location of out-of-school provision (see point 5 below) may have implications for how this can be provided.
- 3 Choice is an important element in the ways that young people access learning from out-of-school activities. The key message from our study is that the reason these young people were involved in all the activities was because they chose to be. Free choice in terms of involvement and contribution is essential if real educational relationships are to be created.
- 4 The skills, efforts and motivation of committed adults are what enthuse and transform young people participating in out-of-school activities. These adults are valued by the young people because they, too, are participating for recreation and enjoyment. The adults are not part of the establishment, nor do they have an ulterior motive beyond the successful outcomes of the group or club.
- 5 Our study supports the current drive towards an extended school day. Schools can act as a facility for other providers in areas where such facilities are limited. However, while schools are important contributors to this provision for younger children, older children preferred activities not on the school site.

### Implications for practice

Schools have particular parameters within which they need to work and they provide a major – but not sole – contribution to the effective life chances of young people. Young people learn in a variety of contexts including home, school and out of school. All three of these strands are crucial and each develops strategies and practice that might inform and enhance the others. The importance of a stable home life in counteracting anti-social behaviour has recently been stressed. This study argues that out-of-school activities complement and complete the triad. In this study the implications for practice were:

- 1 The value of out-of-school activities lies in their difference from school activities. Out-of-school activities may be described as 'authentic'. Roth and Lee (2006) describe authentic learning as real in terms of free choice of involvement and contribution. Those who provide such opportunities for young people need to acknowledge and work with this.
- 2 Educational relationships in authentic learning contexts have less power imbalance. Better out-of-school provision could have a notable impact on learning in schools. Our study clearly indicated that where this had occurred, it was because young people's relationship with teachers had been changed. A key factor in facilitating this appeared to be the students' perceptions of the adults in the out-of-school activities as co-learners. However, this is always going to be problematic for the relationship between teachers and students in schools where the delivery of prescribed curricula and syllabi changes little from year to year and teachers are always seen as the holders of the knowledge. How teachers make explicit, within their teaching role, their own position as a co-learner needs further exploration.



# 1 Introduction

The relationship between poverty and lack of school attainment is well established (Gregg *et al.*, 1999; HM Treasury, 1999; Ennals, 2005). Policy initiatives to address this have only met with partial success (Bradshaw, 2005) and many young people are still trapped in a cycle of deprivation, educational underachievement and failure. The research reported here was premised on the view that positive, focused educational relationships between teachers and pupils are likely to promote positive attitudes to school and learning which will ultimately lead to greater achievement.

However, to successfully establish such relationships, pupils as well as their teachers need well-developed interpersonal skills and understanding. This study explored the opportunities young people have for developing these skills in the educational relationships they experience out of school. Through the *Youth Matters* (DfES, 2005b, 2006) and *Extended Schools* (DfES, 2005a) agenda, government policy has acknowledged the importance of out-of-school experiences for young people in terms of their behaviour and sense of inclusion in society, but there has been little exploration of how out-of-school activities contribute to young people's identities as learners. A wider understanding of what and how to learn may have an impact not only on formal school learning, but also in embedding skills of lifelong learning in young people.

In this research, we surmised that young people who engage in learning out of school could acquire a confidence in social interaction that might impact on the teacher–pupil relationship in school with the effect of improving learning. We proposed that young people who experience a diversity of educational relationships, in a range of contexts, will have a better understanding of how those relationships work. Thus, they will be in a better position to use that understanding to negotiate the educational relationships that they have with teachers in school. This will improve their access to the curriculum. Better learning comes from the better relationships established to support it. If young people in low-income families are denied, or limited in, these experiences then they will be further disadvantaged in their engagement with teachers and the learning that takes place in school.

Some out-of-school activities are spontaneous and informal: any learning that occurs is incidental and not necessarily part of the reason for participating. Others, however, involve what might be called intentional (though not necessarily academic) learning – participants are in a one-to-one or group context where someone (often an adult) facilitates the activity. Participation leads to some form of progression in terms of skills or advanced knowledge. We define such organised activities as having a *learning intent*, although the participants often do not perceive them as learning

experiences, but describe them as some form of leisure pursuit. Our argument is that young people implicitly learn about how educational relationships work in these organised leisure activities. Who does what and how, in creating opportunities for learning, gives them insight into negotiating the relationships that support learning. These are the soft skills that give them the 'social capital' that is known to increase their life chances (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Our research intended to clarify the roles and relationships that young people experience within these organised activities, the rules that guide the activities and their behaviour, and their understanding of the learning that occurs.

The study therefore addressed three questions:

- What do young people gain from engagement in out-of-school activities that involve a learning intent?
- Do young people from low-income families participate less in these activities than those from more affluent homes?
- If so what can be done to redress the added disadvantage that this creates for young people in low-income families?

The study focused on the learners themselves and consisted of in-depth interviews with young people living in poverty and those in more affluent circumstances. The receipt of free school meals was used as an indicator of poverty. While we acknowledge this is not an absolute indicator, in that it is known that young people move on and off the free school meal register as family circumstances change, those young people receiving free school meals are from families already in receipt of other income support and are thus experiencing impoverished circumstances. These young people were matched with others within their schools who were not entitled to free school meals (the more affluent). In order to ensure enough young people on free school meals to meet our target number in any one year group, we approached schools with a high proportion of young people on the free school meals register. It is therefore important to note that all the schools in the study had catchment areas of relative disadvantage.

In order to investigate age-related changes, we interviewed young people from Year 6 (11 years old) and Year 9 (14 years old). Engagement with out-of-school activities is always, to some extent, a question of opportunity and this was one of the issues we wished to explore. Also young people living in rural areas may have a very different experience than those living in an urban context. We therefore chose schools in both rural and urban contexts. We approached two primary and three secondary

schools in two rural and two urban areas. Our intended sample size of 48 (24 free school meals and 24 more affluent), split evenly between primary and secondary phases and rural and urban locations, necessitated involving two rural secondary schools although both served similar catchments. The urban primary school and urban secondary school were in different towns although, again, they served similar catchments. The final sample is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 The interviews**

	Rural		Urban		Total
	Free school meals	More affluent	Free school meals	More affluent	
Primary (Year 6)	6	8	6	6	26
Secondary (Year 9)	2+5	6+4	6	6	29
Total	13	18	12	12	55

The young people were accessed through their schools, and were asked if they would be willing to talk to us about what they did after school and at the weekends. Letters were also sent to their homes requesting parental/carer permission for them to be interviewed.

Prior to the interview, we invited the young people to complete a map illustrating how, in a typical week, they spent their time when not at school (see Appendix 1). The map formed the focus for the interview (Appendix 2) and each child was asked:

- to clarify the activities represented on the map and their location, other participants, and accessibility
- about other activities that take place in their neighbourhood in which they did not participate
- about activities that they would like to do but could not, and the reasons for that.

Two activities were chosen for more in-depth exploration, one by the interviewer and the other by the children themselves. The former was, when possible, an activity involving adults and taking place on a regular basis. For the focused activities the interview explored:

- the reasons for the child's participation
- the extent of their engagement

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- the relationship with the adults involved and with the other participants
- what the youngster felt they learned from the activity and how this happened
- any connections they made with learning in school.

## 2 What do young people gain from being involved in out-of-school activities?

### Introduction

We made the claim earlier that out-of-school activities are an important, but undervalued, area in the development of children's learning. Governments concern themselves with formal education and lay down expectations for school learning. The *Extended Schools* prospectus suggests schools provide a variety of after-school activities either themselves or in partnership with other organisations. However, the examples given appear to link this provision with ways of extending school learning (e.g. homework clubs), better childcare arrangements, the importance of parental involvement in school, or opportunities to tackle problems of anti-social behaviour (DfES, 2005a). They show little concern about the role of such activities in the development of young people's learning and their perceptions of themselves as learners. While our study was particularly interested in the experiences of young people in poverty and how these differed from those of their more affluent peers, in focusing on out-of-school activities we first needed to establish the distinguishing features of this type of learning.

The number and range of activities in which 11 and 14 year olds engage were immediately apparent from the initial analysis of our interviews. The 26 11 year olds engaged in 17 different organised activities and 20 different spontaneous ones; while the 29 14 year olds were even more diverse, mentioning 18 organised clubs and 31 spontaneous activities. The main focus of the study was on the possible advantages for learning conferred by educational relationships in what we defined as organised activities with a learning intent. These are the activities that have some adult input and are often, although not always, focused on one particular activity. We included sports clubs, drama clubs, uniformed groups and youth clubs in this category. Overwhelmingly the young people stated that they enjoyed these experiences more than comparable in-school activities. Consequently we explored the personal intent and motivation driving their initial engagement in, and continued commitment to, these activities in order to determine the features and processes that enthused the young participants. We also explored how the young people conceptualised the role adults played in these activities.

## Initial commitment

The main impetus for taking part in any organised out-of-school activity was social. The young people were drawn into activities at the suggestion of or with the encouragement of others. Often this was parental interest or influence:

I started football because my dad went – my dad coaches [*local team*] and runs football courses.  
(14-year-old girl)

Football club because all the men in my family play for a football team and they've always wanted a boy child that's really into football like them.  
(14-year-old boy)

For others it was a non-family member:

It wasn't me who like decided. One of my friends' dad saw me playing football and thought I was really good and he talked to me and asked if I wanted to join, so I said yes and that's how I got to do it.  
(11-year-old girl)

Peers often had more persuasive power when the activity was less structured. For example, the pull of youth clubs and church groups was nearly always the social engagement with peers:

*R:*<sup>1</sup> My friend went [*to the church youth club*] and thought she'd invite me and I enjoyed it so my mum let me go.

*I:* Have you met other people going there?

*R:* All my friends from school go.

*I:* Are they your best friends?

*R:* Yes.  
(11-year-old girl)

A few young people had pursued an activity from their own volition and by age 14 (Year 9) more students felt they were able to make independent decisions about their out-of-school activities.

But then they started up the girls' [*rugby*] team, so I went and joined that. So I did it basically on my own rather than as a suggestion from anyone else ... And my mum never made it to secondary school, cos basically they couldn't afford it. So I have to work all on my own. I'm more independent.

(14-year-old girl)

## Continued commitment

### *Pleasure*

Enjoyment of the experience was said to be the main reason for commitment to an out-of-school activity. Keeping boredom at bay by doing something different was a major incentive for engagement, particularly with the younger group where only four from a total of 26 were not engaged in some form of organised out-of-school activity. The young people in the study consistently used the word 'fun' to describe the activities in which they were involved.

### *Friendship*

The social advantages of wider networks were also frequently stressed. The young people said that the friends they made in different contexts were in addition to school friends. New friendships were more likely to be nurtured from activities in specific clubs than in less focused groups such as youth clubs. Here, the young people described enjoyment as spending time and having a laugh with current 'mates'. Although it was usually the case that school friends were thought to be the long-standing or 'best' friends, it was agreed that other friends, made through different networks, provided fresh and broader perspectives on issues such as behaviour and priorities. While different friendship groups need not always be a positive influence on young people, they seem to be so in organised clubs. The talk was of shared motivation and commitment to improving skills rather than filling time.

### *The role of adults*

The personal attention that was given to them by the participating adults was also a strong factor in their membership:

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Most of the staff [*at ATC*] are friends with the people there so we get on well.

(14-year-old boy)

This was even true about the relationships formed in clubs held in schools, run by adults who also were teachers. The difference between observations of the same adult in different contexts is evident in the following quotes:

Yeah it's quieter in a smaller group, and you're not too shy. The teachers are more fun in Drama Group. They're not really a teacher; they're just there to help out with us.

(11-year-old girl)

Yeah, I have a better [*relationship*] with [*teacher*], because I see her about, I see her for one hour on Tuesday morning for my PE lesson, then I see her on Monday. So I know her quite well.

(11-year-old girl)

However, in most cases parental support was also needed for continued membership:

I did do it years ago, when I was really little, but I stopped doing it, because me and my mum, at home, we were arguing a lot, and this was when I was little, so I thought, oh I'll quit, because that's what the arguments was coming from, cos she didn't want me doing it.

(14-year-old girl)

*R:* I talk to my mum about it, she likes that I go to different clubs and that.

*I:* Why does she like it do you think?

*R:* Because it's healthy for you and you get exercise.  
(11-year-old girl)

Not surprisingly support, in terms of permission, was needed by the younger group but practical support was also often essential for the older group:

*R:* Yeah, I either get, my mum will take me down and I'll walk back. Or if I'm in [*town*] and I have my training kit, if I have some old clothes I just ring my mum up and ask her to bring my boots down.

*I:* Right so your mum has to service your stuff. And what about Sundays [*match days*]?

*R:* Sundays my mum will take me to wherever I need to go and she usually takes other people with her.

*I:* ... do other parents do that as well?

*R:* Other parents help out as well, but most times it's like they have enough cars so they all go with their own parents.  
(14-year-old boy)

## What do young people learn?

An analysis of the learning that took place within these organised activities revealed the value and richness of the participation and therefore highlighted what is denied to those young people unable to take part. It is possible to see the development of specialist vocabulary and skills and the evaluation and reward of these through local and national frames of assessment. Further analysis provided insight into the differences between these activities and those of the classroom as the young people discussed their attitudes towards the management of behaviour, the responsibilities they took and the understanding they had of their progress.

### ***Specialist knowledge***

The vocabularies used by the young people in discussing their involvement were helpful in revealing how they were developing an expertise in the activities. Although this may seem rather obvious it was striking how the young people took pleasure in describing the detail of the activities that they enjoyed.

Julie,<sup>2</sup> a 14-year-old girl from a rural area, saw herself and her family as 'sporty' and described her involvement with swimming in great detail. Her vocabulary included *flippers, snorkel, nose clip, goggles, lengths, lanes, workouts, crawl, fly, backstroke, dive* and *stamina*.

Eleven-year-old Kenneth used karate terms including *sensei, stances, moves, tiger strike* and *dojo* in his description of the hierarchy of skills to be acquired. His enthusiasm for the activity was clear: he cycled a long distance each week in all weathers to attend the club.

Hilary, aged 14, discussed her drama club using the terms *script*, *character*, *production*, *stage setting*, *National Youth Theatre* and *chorus*, and described her ambition to develop a career in the theatre. She had already performed in a local festival and in amateur productions staged at a nearby provincial theatre.

It was possible to see value in the acquisition of these vocabularies per se as evidence of skills and understanding that the young people had acquired during the activities. Their vocabularies, however, also revealed more than the specific knowledge gained; they also indicated their membership of a group defined through shared vocabularies. The self-esteem built from using a specialised vocabulary shared by adults and peers in relation to a common enjoyed activity is an important aspect of gaining confidence as a learner. That confidence can be transferred to learning in school.

The skills that the young people discussed revealed further benefits. Almost all the organised activities had structured systems for assessing and rewarding achievement. We heard about graded belts for karate; prizes for competitive swimming, trampoline, dancing, football, athletics and riding; national certificates for ballet and music; badges and levels awarded for achievement in the Scouts and St John's Ambulance. These awards were tangible evidence of learning that could be drawn on in the future. Other achievement was marked through the completion of performances such as shows, displays, field trips and religious festivals, and tasks including the creation of crafts items such as puppets. These assessments and events were further confirmation of the child's engagement within groups and provided public recognition of success. The links with adult clubs, commercial theatres and national associations provided the opportunity for the young people to make an authentic contribution to the domain. Many of the young people eagerly anticipated their move to the adult club. Although such transitions usually depended on age they also indicated their development of higher-level skills.

Graham aspired to play cricket at county level and achieve the same level as his father:

... being as good as my dad would be good enough ... He plays for  
[team] firsts, I play for the under 15s.  
(14-year-old boy)

The young people were able to see that the activities in which they were involved had value in the adult world. Consequently their perceptions of themselves as successful contributors to society were enhanced – something that is very difficult to achieve in the day-to-day activities of a school classroom.

At 14, Anthony had already learned the skills of skittles by working alongside two teams as the 'sticker upper' and he was now a full team member. He was occupied by these skittle activities three nights a week.

Many of these events and the achievement of the awards had become such significant life experiences for the young people that they linked them to their future career aspirations, for example in the theatre or in a sporting context.

Kenneth had begun karate in order to provide him with the discipline that he would need to join the army:

My dad thought it was a good idea because karate has a lot of discipline and if I want to go into the army I need discipline ... when I am 13 I'm planning to go to Army Academy. The only problem is I don't have far to go until I leave the karate club ... When you're a black belt with a stripe down the middle you're good enough to teach.

(11-year-old boy)

These authentic activities have a part to play in school learning. While the school curriculum is more about a prescribed set of skills and knowledge, the benefit of out-of-school activities is the relevant application of skills and knowledge in different contexts.

### ***Self-control and confidence***

A further contrast between these activities and those in school was the attitudes that the young people held towards discipline and behaviour. Several of those interviewed talked about how they had learned to moderate their behaviour through their participation in the clubs and were able to transfer this learning into the classroom.

Alice was typical of many who described how they had improved their behaviour:

I wasn't that well behaved for *[teacher]* ... but then I improved my behaviour, so now we get on alright ... I don't know why but I was just answering back, and then I improved my behaviour.

(11-year-old girl)

While the young people struggled to articulate the process of behaviour modification they were very aware of the structures in place to sustain the good organisation of the activity. Strict discipline was applied and maintained within many of these out-of-

school settings but was accepted without complaint, and it was clearly differentiated from that in school. In all cases the young people were aware of the rules and the consequences when people broke the rules – swimming extra lengths, running around the rugby field, or being barred from attendance – but it was not a problem and was often self-regulated.

Eleven-year-old Claire described how everybody kept to the rules in the youth club and accepted them:

You're not allowed to have food and drink at badminton because you're not allowed to take drinks in there. And you're not allowed to run around, you've got to walk. And the only place you're allowed to run around is in the badminton area and outside the chairs, and that's it really.

She explained that a child would not be sent home as a punishment: 'That's a waste of our money'. Rather a child would be asked to miss the next session.

Isobel (aged 11 years) explained how the girls in her netball club behave well, 'cos no one really mucks about because they want to get on with the game', while classmate Robert discussed the behaviour in his drama club: 'The only time we chat is when we're practising and we talk about the scenarios'. He went on to say that the children behaved better in the drama club than they did in the classroom and suggested that this was because 'There's more to do so it's not boring'.

In contrasting her club coaches to teachers, 11-year-old Alice had a less explicitly formed view: 'They don't shout as much as teachers. I don't know why'. However, she then suggested that others in her football team respond more readily to admonishments: 'The coach gives them a warning and people do as they are told'.

Their increased understanding of managing their own behaviour in different contexts also led to increased levels of self-confidence.

Amy discussed the increase in confidence in school resulting from her involvement with the drama club:

I've been speaking out more for what I think. I've done drama in front of the class and in assembly.  
(11-year-old girl)

Sophie explained how her computer club at the library had helped her confidence:

It helps me, because sometimes I'll read out loud and because I never used to be very good at reading out aloud, like I stuttered quite a bit.

(11-year-old girl)

### ***About learning***

Another striking aspect of the young people's engagement with these out-of-school activities was their level of understanding and articulation of what they had learnt and the progressive nature of learning. It is rare in schools for young people to have the opportunity to express what they feel they have learned and what the next stage should be. When asked what they had learnt in these out-of-school activities, the young people's typical responses were articulate and insightful.

Chris, a 14-year-old boy, explained how the young people who attended his rugby club were given responsibility for focusing aspects of the training: 'we decide what happens for the last ten minutes of the training sessions'.

Graham explained some of the skills that he had learnt in cricket:

The coach has helped me with my bowling because I used to bowl with a massive run up and bowl quick, but I've slowed down my pace to bowl with more accuracy. My bowling is much tighter and I get wickets.

(14-year-old boy)

As many of these activities were popular sports, the young people regularly played in matches against other local teams. In the dance club that 11-year-old Cheryl attended, the participants were able to build on the technical learning from the session to choreograph short sections of their performance.

However, this articulation of their learning was very rarely shared with their teachers at school. When asked, most young people said either that they had not told their teachers that they participated in these activities or that they did not know whether their teachers knew. This is an indication of the separation of learning in the minds of the young people. If learning is a consequence of experiences in all contexts, making connections between different sites of learning is vital. Understanding how learning happens can make it more accessible.

### ***About the importance of educational relationships***

The relationships with the adults involved in the activity were a strong factor in continued membership and a clear ingredient in the learning process. We identified two main ways in which the adults worked. The data suggested that there was a distinction between focused organised out-of-school activities – such as sports teams and drama productions – where there is an overarching purpose and expected outcomes, and the less focused (but still organised) clubs and groups.

### *Supervisors*

In youth clubs and church groups where several activities were on offer, the adults occasionally joined in, but their main role was providing the facilities, supervising in a general way and taking the money or running the refreshment area. The distant nature of the relationship was often indicated by a mere noting of their presence rather than an explanation of their involvement:

*I:* And do the adults join in the activities with you?

*R:* Yeah they join in some of the activities.

*I:* Right and what else do they do?

*R:* Just supervise us?  
(14-year-old boy)

Although the adults sometimes joined in the activity their presence was seen to be peripheral to anything the child learned from that particular activity. The role of the adults appeared to be to provide a framework within which the young people could themselves explore different social contexts.

Carol could describe in great detail all the activities that she participated in at the church club – badminton, air football, darts, table tennis etc. – but did not mention the adults until asked specifically what they did:

*R:* They like watch us [*breaks off to tell about a child she had helped when she fell over*]

*I:* ... So what do the adults do?

*R:* They watch out but some of them sing with you and that [*later she added*] there's another one in the tuck shop and there's D— he's a teacher.  
(11-year-old girl)

That is not to say that the young people did not learn from the adults' presence (for example social skills) but the adults were not seen as an integral part of the activity:

*R:* They just stand around and supervise. Or sometimes they supervise, or they just stand around watching you, see what you're doing and they start chatting to you and get to know what you're doing and that.

*I:* Right. Yeah. So it's a bit like a sort of youth worker people ... and do they join in? Do they ...?

*R:* Yeah they can join in. Yeah they normally do.

*I:* And do they teach you things? ... I mean they're not like, are they like teachers?

*R:* They normally teach us new games.

*I:* Right.

*R:* And how we can change the rules a bit and put it into our own rules.  
(14-year-old girl)

### *Role models*

In the more focused organised activities the adults were a key element of the young people's involvement. They were seen as role models and the young people aspired to the particular proficiencies which they attributed to these leaders. This was very different from the way they viewed teachers. The adults' expertise was their contribution to the activity, not their 'adulthood'. In fact, in some activities the young people themselves were more expert than other adults in the group who were perceived as fellow learners. This added to their understanding of learning as progression and the educational relationships as a two-way endeavour.

*R:* ... the lower grades are from five years old to, well adults, cos adults start joining as well.

*I:* And is that something you like about it; that people are all different ages at different stages, it doesn't matter how old you are, you can be a very senior person.

*R:* Yeah, and it's sort of something different from at school, it's not the adults always telling you what to do.

*I:* Yeah.

*R:* Because sometimes they're younger people than you.  
(14-year-old girl)

Whatever role the adult played in the activity, the relationship was always perceived as being very different than with teachers in school, even when it was the same adult (for example, teachers taking drama or sports clubs). Out of school, adults were perceived as more approachable and friendly. Although the adults in the clubs could be strict and quite demanding they were much more likely to be described as friends and the predominant word used was 'fun' in relation to both the adults and the activities.

Teachers were seen as being 'in' authority and this always dominates the educational relationships in the classroom:

Some teachers wind me up. I know they're older and they have the right to shout at us because they're teachers, but they just take advantage of us.

(14-year-old girl)

In the out-of-school groups the adults were seen as 'an' authority in the domain of the activity. This led to the educational relationship in these groups being seen as more equal. Although there was an acknowledgement that some teachers in school were more approachable, they were described as the 'good' teachers whereas in the out-of-school activities approachability was accepted as the norm.

The good teachers show respect – they give you the right to say something, like if they're having a go at you they actually give you the right to have your opinion.

(14-year-old girl)

### **Agency**

The reason power appeared to be very much more evenly distributed in the organised out-of-school clubs was the young people's belief in their own agency. The young people acknowledged that, like themselves, the adults had made an active choice to participate and this led to a real feeling of shared community.

Barbara trains with a football club:

*I:* ... who organises it, who trains you?

*R:* Erm a person, well a girl called D— and someone I train with's dad called C—

*I:* OK. And why do they train, what do they know about football?

*R:* Well erm, C— is like a referee and everything.

*I:* Right.

*R:* And D— enjoys playing football and everything and she just joined the club to help.  
(14-year-old girl)

Their sense of active involvement could also explain the young people's difficulty in understanding our questions about discipline (see above). Everyone involved had made the same choice to participate and therefore would not continue without some sense of fulfilment. Roth and Lee (2006) describe genuine learning communities as having a collective intent or purpose and free choice in terms of engagement and contribution. These out-of school activities matched these criteria in a way that schools cannot.

Involvement was by choice: each individual chose how they contributed and the extent of their participation. Individuals came and went and perceptions of expertise moved. The young people were able to contribute their greater knowledge and understanding of the activity to the new members. In many of the activities they saw the adults as co-learners, sometimes taking the lead because they had the greater knowledge and expertise but at other times acknowledging the greater expertise of the young people themselves. All this allowed the young people a sense of agency in their own learning.

### Summary

Our data showed a wide range of benefits that young people involved in out-of-school organised activities gained from their participation. Specialist knowledge and skills, self-control and confidence were clearly identified in the discourse of this group. And key to this learning appeared to be their engagement in real activities in learning communities involving adults as well as their peers. The young people conceptualised adults in the out-of-school activities and their teachers in school in very different ways. Teachers in classrooms were not seen as role models in the same way as those adults in the out-of-school clubs. Teachers tended to be perceived as part of the system rather than as part of the activity itself. They are not seen as experts in the domain of the lesson. They are teachers who deliver curricula and keep order. The adults in the out-of-school activities were co-learners and an integral part of the activity.

The compulsory nature of school works against this understanding of self-efficacy in progressing young people's own learning. While we are not advocating 'de-schooling society' (Illich, 1971), we do think our findings have clear implications for the complementary roles of different sites of learning (school, home, out of school). We address this further in our final chapter.

### **3 The difference in participation between young people from low-income families and those from more affluent homes**

As we have shown in the previous chapter there are clear benefits for learning from participation in out-of-school activities. We now consider whether there is any disparity between the experiences of young people in receipt of free school meals and those in more affluent circumstances. If, as we surmised at the beginning of the study, young people on free school meals are less likely to be participating in organised out-of-school activities, then they are being placed at greater disadvantage in relation to their understanding of, and engagement in, meaningful educational relationships.

Fifty-five young people were interviewed in the study, 25 of whom were receiving free school meals. Table 1 in Chapter 1 shows that there were 26 Year 6 children (11 year olds) in the study and of these just under half (12) were receiving free school meals. From Year 9 (14 year olds) there were 29 young people and 13 of these were receiving free school meals. In this chapter we explore the activities the different groups of young people reported doing and their opportunities to access and attend organised out-of-school activities.

#### **How out-of-school time is spent**

As with quantitative studies (DfES, 2006) our study shows the diversity of young people's lives outside the school and home settings and exposes the wide range of organised and spontaneous activities in which they are involved. In doing so, it allows us some insight into young people's everyday leisure experiences and reveals them to be very active social agents within their communities and at home. Table 2 sets out the different activities reported by young people in the study, and breaks them down by year group and financial status.

**Table 2 Young people’s organised and spontaneous activities after school by year group and free school meal status**

	Year 6		Year 9	
	Free school meals	More affluent	Free school meals	More affluent
Organised activities	Cricket club	Church club	Air Training Corps	Activity club
	Dance club	Cricket club	Athletics club	Cricket club
	Drama club	Drama club	Cricket club	Drama club
	Football club	Football club	Football club	Football training
	Karate club	Guitar lessons	Foster club	Guides
	Monday club	Language lessons	Skittles	Karate
	St John’s	Netball club		Kick boxing
	Ambulance	School art club		Martial arts
	Youth club	School council		Modern dancing
		Scouts		Rugby
		Swimming club		Swimming club
		School tag rugby club		Trampolining
		Youth club		Volleyball
		Horse riding		Youth centre
				Church group
Spontaneous activities	Computer – at local library	Computer	Archery – with dad at home	Caring for pets
	Cooking	Cooking	Bingo	Clubbing
	Den making	Dog training	See boyfriend	Computer
	Family	Family	Use computer at home	Cooking family – mum working
	Family responsibilities	Mosque	Go down town	Family
	Football with friends	MSN messaging to friends	Drag racing with father	Football
	Meet friends	Pet care	Drumming	Homework
	See girlfriend	Reading	Family	Ice skating
	Hang around town	Shopping with friends or family	responsibilities	Manhunt
	Mountain biking on own	Swimming with friends or family	Sibling care	Playstation
	Play outside	Tag rugby	Fishing	Playing pool with friends
	Read	Watch TV	Football with friends	Reading
	Shopping	Work – paper round	Play golf with friends	See non-resident father
	Sleepovers		Hang out with friends	Shopping with mates
	Watch TV		Homework	Sleepovers
			Ice skating with family	Go to sports centre
			Go to nightclub	Swimming with friends or family
			See non-resident father	Trampolining at home
			Shopping	Watch TV
			Swimming	Work – paper round
		TV		
		Work – babysitting		
		skittles		

The table shows the considerable diversity of both organised and spontaneous activities described by the young people. What is immediately apparent is the rich seam of reported spontaneous activities enjoyed by both groups, those on free school meals and the more affluent. Inevitably the young people spent a considerable amount of time with their friends and families. Family activities revolved around the everyday practices of family life, including shopping and outings and, for some young people, a heavier engagement with family responsibilities such as supporting parents, cooking and caring for siblings. Wider family relationships were also clearly important, with young people spending time with relatives and, in the case of young people living in separated households, with non-resident parents.

While time spent with family and friends was clearly fulfilling and, in most cases, formative and instructive, this is a separate issue for investigation. Our focus in this report is the possible value added by educational relationships that are beyond the experiences of school and home.

Many young people spent time alone watching TV, playing on their computers and reading. It was interesting that very few youngsters indicated that they spent time on homework. This was revealed both by the visual maps that were created before the interviews and by the subsequent discussions. It is difficult to gauge whether this meant that young people did not do homework or whether they did not see it as an out-of-school activity. The distinction between activities that are connected with school and those that are non-school is important and we discuss this later.

Informal time with friends was also important and activities with friends ranged from playing self-organised complex games such as manhunt, through biking, fishing, football and swimming to just hanging about together in their neighbourhoods. Some older children were also working after school.

There was little apparent difference between the young people on free school meals and the more affluent young people with regard to spontaneous activities, although the young people on free school meals were more likely to be involved with family responsibilities. But when we looked at the organised activities the picture changed to reveal substantive differences between the type and quality of the activities experienced by the two groups.

The *Youth Matters* survey (DfES, 2006) found that a quarter of the young people surveyed do not attend organised out-of-school activities. Similarly, we found that of the 30 more affluent young people in the study, 24 were attending some kind of organised activity after school and only six were not. But for the young people on free school meals, the picture was very different: only 14 out of the 25 young people were

attending some organised after-school provision, while 11 were not. This is a higher number and comparatively higher proportion than in the more affluent young people and indicates differences in experience between the young people on free school meals and their peers. This was particularly marked in Year 9 where only five out of the 16 more affluent young people were missing out on organised out-of-school activities, compared with well over half (eight) of the 13 young people receiving free school meals.

There was also a considerable difference between the two age groups. In Year 6 there was a notable difference between the types of activities taken up by the young people (see Table 2). The more affluent young people were attending a wide variety of activities including the school council, art, music, drama and sport. However, although some of the young people on free school meals attended similar clubs they were relatively more reliant on school provision. Cricket, drama, netball and football are all examples of clubs offered by schools, although the church also played a role in the provision of youth clubs. In Year 9 the distinction between the two groups was starker. The more affluent young people were engaging in a rich and varied range of organised activities, including sports, martial arts, drama and dancing. In contrast the young people on free school meals took part in a narrower range of activities. Three of these young people were doing sporting activities – fairly traditional ones – and one child (who is fostered) was involved in a foster club. The fifth child attended the Air Training Corps, although this was instrumental to getting employment in the future.

### ***Gender differences***

We also compared the experiences of boys and girls in our sample. In this small study, there appeared to be very little gender difference. The impact of impoverished circumstances was much greater than gender on whether or not these young people engaged in out-of-school activities.

### ***The rural experience***

In contrast, living in a rural location appeared to have a strong effect on uptake of out-of-school activities. Young people in poverty and living in rural locations were doubly disadvantaged. Only five of the 13 young people receiving free school meals in rural locations took part in some form of organised out-of-school activity. This compared to nine out of the 12 young people receiving free school meals in urban locations and 15 out of the 18 more affluent rural young people.

It may be that poverty in the countryside is starker because of the greater relative difference between those in receipt of free school meals and those who are not. The urban schools in the study may have had a more homogenous population and so the gap between the circumstances of those children in receipt of free school meals and those who are not may be narrower. However, the findings raise concerns about the range and quality of out-of-school experiences that low-income young people are able to access in rural communities.

The school was clearly identified as an important source of organised leisure opportunities for young people on free school meals. There was some evidence that low-income young people with sporting abilities can be picked up and noticed at school and in some cases steered towards external clubs. This was the case for Natalie, a 14-year-old girl living in an urban area, who was spotted as a talented athlete at primary school and encouraged to attend a local athletics club. However, not all young people are sporty and in some instances our interviewees reported a lack of opportunities for leisure at their schools, particularly if they were not keen on sports.

Leanne is a girl from a rural community who wants to take part in clubs but feels that school provision is unsuited to her needs:

I could stay on at school but I'd probably end up walking home because my dad would be at work and there's not really anything at the school that I like because it's always sports. I just don't like exercise. I'm a very lazy person.

(14-year-old girl on free school meals)

The problems of the rural young people mirrored those of other young people on free school meals discussed below but were exacerbated by fewer options, transport and distance. However, the lack of awareness about opportunities that existed in the area and about the nature of these activities was very real.

Sally, who spends much of her free time watching television and frequenting fast food outlets with 'mates', talks about her aspirations:

*R:* When I was a little girl, I always wanted to do ballet [*laughs*] ... Yeah. I still want to do it, but do you think I'm a bit too old to do it aren't I?

*I:* No, you're never too old to do things that you want to do. Do they have any ballet lessons around here?

*R:* I don't know why I put ballet lessons, I just want to learn how to do the splits and go to the gym.

*I:* Yeah. Sounds like you'd like dancing as well.

*R:* *[Laughs]* Do you know the gym? ... I'd love to go to the gym but I've never gone there. I'd really love to go to the gym one day in my life. Because I think I'm a bit, you know chubby a little bit, and I wanna go to the gym and be nice and skinny like all of my friends. But they say 'S— you're not fat, because you're just good how you are'.

(11-year-old rural girl on free school meals)

This lack of knowledge was aggravated by concern about possible direct or indirect costs of the activity. Even if the activities were free, lower confidence and resolve compounded difficulties in accessing clubs and groups that may be available in a more distant town or village.

*R:* Erm, I've always thought of trampolining, but in, I think they've got it in the leisure centre, but you have to pay for that, and I didn't really think anything of it.

*I:* Right.

*R:* And I think they've got it in *[nearby town]* but I haven't really asked about it.

*I:* Right. And is that because you know it'll be too expensive?

*R:* No I just haven't.

(Gill, 14-year-old rural girl on free school meals)

It was not just the young people themselves who suffered gaps in their knowledge: while more affluent families paved the way for their children's ambitions, those in poverty were less likely to do so. Whether this stems from unfamiliarity with such clubs and groups, apathy or other factors is not clear.

James, a social lad who regularly plays football and builds dens with his friends, admits he is not clear about how to become involved in the free after-school drama club. He has not pursued the possibilities and neither have his (separated) parents.

*I:* Why don't you go to drama? Tell me?

*R:* I don't know.

*I:* No, have you ever thought of going to drama?

*R:* Yeah. My friend does it.

*I:* I wonder why you don't go then?

*R:* Cos there's no more spaces left.

*I:* There's no more spaces left? Oh no. Have you asked?

*R:* No.

*I:* No. Just feel that there's no more spaces left?

*R:* Yeah.

*I:* Why would you want to go to drama?

*R:* Cos you get to do fun stuff.  
(11-year-old rural boy on free school meals)

### **Why are young people on free school meals not attending organised activities?**

As the exchanges above illustrate, findings from this study revealed a complex array of factors affecting young people's engagement with organised out-of-school activities. For the young people on free school meals there was a range of issues and concerns including availability, access and cost, families and friends and young people's self-perceptions of themselves as attendees. These factors often overlapped and interacted with each other, and they formed a complex constellation of disadvantages which inhibited the young people's opportunities for organised out-of-school experiences. There were very few (six) more affluent young people not attending organised clubs. In many ways their reasons for non-attendance resonated closely with those of the young people on free school meals.

### **Access**

A key element in the attendance of young people on free school meals was the availability and/or perception of availability of organised activities in their schools and neighbourhoods. This was a complex issue linked to access and cost and to the young people's perceptions of what was possible for them and open to them. It was clear that many of these young people felt that there were no opportunities for organised activities either at school or in their neighbourhoods. This perception of lack of opportunity and choice was compounded by difficulties in gaining access to whatever was available. Previous research has shown that the cost of attending is a key factor in the participation of low-income young people in out-of-school opportunities (Ridge, 2002). Concerns about the cost of transport and the cost of joining were clearly evident. Transport was a key concern and often affected whether young people could do things that their friends were doing.

Jackie wanted to go to dance classes like her friends but they were held in a nearby town and she could not afford the transport to get there:

It's not that far but you'd have to pay a bus journey and you've got to pay for it when you get there. That's a lot of money.  
(Year 9 rural girl on free school meals)

Organised activities often involved extra costs, entrance fees and equipment. Some, like football, may require parents to take their children to matches further afield; this can be particularly problematic in families where transport is lacking and therefore reciprocity between families is not possible. Without a car, low-income parents may be reluctant to enter into reciprocal arrangements for attending clubs and events. This was having an impact on children like James, a Year 6 rural, free school meals boy, who plays football with his friend, but is unable to go the football club because of the cost of joining and getting to training and matches.

However, although showing some similarity with regard to family and friends the more affluent non-attenders did not express the same set of concerns as the young people on free school meals in relation to access. Only one of the more affluent group commented that she lived in a very rural neighbourhood and there was little available for her in her village which was poorly served by either facilities or public transport.

### ***Families and friends***

Another factor in the lack of organised activities among young people on free school meals was involvement in family life, which took time and commitment. Some young people claimed that they preferred to be at home with their families than taking part in clubs. There were several young people who came from large families and these families are likely to be particularly disadvantaged (Bradshaw, 2006) in terms of limited income for additional activities and the demands of sharing responsibilities for younger siblings. Many of the young people were also living in complex and re-formed families, and time was being spent with non-resident fathers and stepfamilies. This potentially reduces the time that young people can spend at organised activities. However, in some cases, time spent with non-resident fathers was a valuable social resource. Some of the young people were doing a range of activities with their fathers including drag racing, mountain biking and attending football matches. Family life was also sometimes chaotic and this militated against attendance.

Gill, a 14 year old, had undertaken a range of family responsibilities including cooking and caring for her two brothers, one of whom had ADHD. Her opportunities to take part in organised activities were severely constrained. As she explained, any clubs would have to take her brothers as well as her. She was also concerned about coming home late to find that social services or the bailiffs had visited. Her home life was clearly too unstable for her to feel secure about taking time out for herself. She had moved back to her mother's from her father's and she showed a keen sense of how her life had changed and its impact on her own well-being:

I do my own thing at my mum's; I get what I want, but not what I need. But at my dad's I get what I need, but less of what I want.

She had previously enjoyed attending a trampolining club with her friend, when she lived with her father, but since moving back to her mother's she had fallen out with her new friends and did not feel that the school had a good opinion of her. The tensions between her social difficulties and her responsibilities at home had inhibited her willingness to try to engage with organised activities, especially those at school.

Gill's experiences highlighted the importance of secure friendships for initiating and sustaining young people in organised activities. Some of the young people were having difficulties sustaining friendships, or had experienced some bullying. The importance of having friends to encourage and share experiences with was evident. Some of the young people who had been attending clubs had dropped out when their friends stopped going. The importance of friends and family for organised activities is explored in more detail above.

Of the six non-attenders from more affluent backgrounds two were heavily involved with family commitments: one was seeing her father at weekends, the other caring for her mother, who had a disability. Friendships were also instrumental in the accounts of another two: one child had been bullied at a previous club and another had fallen out with the friend with whom they used to attend.

### ***Self-perceptions***

Where there were no affordable organised activities for the young people they were generally frustrated and disappointed. But for the young people on free school meals this lack of opportunity was also reflected in their sense of self as a non-attendeo – someone who did not want to engage in the same way as others. This perception of themselves as somehow different from their peers was apparent in several of the young people's accounts.

Simon sees himself as 'a loner' and doesn't like sports. He would like to go to a youth club but there is nothing available for him:

I'm not really into going around in groups and stuff.  
(14-year-old urban boy on free school meals)

For Celia, opportunities in her rural neighbourhood seemed particularly sparse; however, as she explains, school activities are not for her as she is different:

We don't have a youth club down at [*village*] so there's nothing to do really with other village people, apart from going down to the park. I don't really join in with all the after school stuff because it doesn't seem that appealing to me, which may sound a bit harsh, but I'm just a bit different to everyone else.  
(14-year-old rural girl on free school meals)

Previous research with low-income young people has shown that where young people are unable to join in with other young people in shared activities they are often involved in saving face, covering up their inability to participate with a seeming indifference (Daly and Leonard, 2002; Ridge, 2002). It was marked that none of the more affluent non-attenders expressed similar indifference.

In addition, some young people appeared to lack confidence when thinking about the possibility of taking part in organised clubs. School clubs were seen as too 'bossy', always full, and difficult to get into. Some young people found it very difficult

to imagine the process of joining: they wanted to take part but were not able to think of ways to find out about places, times and other requirements. The young people's attitudes to organised clubs were complex and nuanced, and while they identified barriers to participation and in some cases feigned indifference to attending those available, they were often keen to do other activities that they imagined they would enjoy.

Sally did not attend any clubs and felt that they would be hard work, but she talked enthusiastically about all the things she would like to do, e.g. football (but boys would tease her), gym, ballet, guitar, horse riding (but it would be too expensive). She really liked computers but would not ask about the school computer club: 'I can't ask because I think, I feel like every time I ask I think it's rude'. She also loved swimming but rarely went, although she had been able to swim regularly at school in the past:

... when I was in Year 3 we went swimming lessons and that. But when we're in Year 4 we can only go when we're in Year 5. And I'm really angry. I can't understand why can Year 3 go and Year 5 and Year 6, but we can't go.

(11-year-old rural girl on free school meals)

The experiences of young people like Sally further indicated that school provision of organised leisure opportunities may be particularly important for younger children when they are not able to access shared peer group activities elsewhere.

## What would they like to do?

As well as asking how they spent their time when not at school, we also asked the students to articulate a 'wish list' – to tell us about anything they would like to do but could not or did not. Their responses were interesting in that they rarely wanted anything that was not already possible or available to others. However, the most noticeable feature was the difference in aspirations between those receiving free school meals and those not. In Year 6, very few children in the more affluent group could think of things that they wanted to do but could not. In contrast, 11 of our 12 children on free school meals mentioned something they wished they could do.

Examples were:

- school clubs that were too expensive: 11-year-old Cheryl would like to do trampolining (there was a local club), 'but it's dear, my mum can't afford it'

- opportunities that had disappeared: Sally (above) had enjoyed swimming classes with the school in Year 3 but was 'very angry' that this no longer happened
- parental restrictions: 'I'd like to go rock climbing but mum says its too dangerous for me'. This girl's mother had also agreed to 'getting a tennis thing in [the garden] so I don't have to join a tennis club like I wanted to'.

While there is some evidence that current parents are more risk adverse in relation to their children's lives (Beck, 2000), those on restricted incomes may also be just as keen to save face with their children about what is, and what is not, affordable as their children are when talking to their friends.

Eleven year olds on free school meals also wanted more local facilities such as adventure playgrounds, swings in a nearby field, a well-equipped park and a swimming pool at school. For some their 'wish list' was very undemanding and personal. Eleven-year-old Tara would like to 'go to a field to do a handstand' while Duane wants to enter competitions on his bike and be allowed to stay out later.

In Year 9, what appeared on the 'wish lists' was less associated with income and more with a desire to be independent. Of the 13 students on free school meals, six mentioned activities they would like to do or have available in their own neighbourhoods as the opportunities for the less affluent were often limited by distance (transport) and choice. Three in this group would like a 'good youth club' (i.e. one that they would want to attend) which they could access independently. Many of the young people attended youth clubs of varying types, some belonging to more than one, but:

Well I suppose if there was a better youth club, cos I don't really go to that one because there's more Year 10 and 11 and if you go they're like 'you're not coming in here' and 'you're fine'. But I haven't really been, but my friend said that she went there and she was told she couldn't go. So I'm scared to go.

(14-year-old urban girl)

Similarly, Duncan would like more facilities in his area:

... where we play football on the green bit near my house we always get told off by people ... cos they say 'oh you're kicking at the cars'. So it'd be better if there was a field near us so we didn't have to always go to the field over there. They could put some goals up.

## Summary

Our research confirmed that almost a half of young people in poverty do not participate in organised out-of-school activities compared to one fifth of their more affluent classmates. This extends the findings from the *Youth Matters* (DfES, 2006) consultation which indicated that one quarter of young people do not participate in organised leisure activities after school hours.

Differences in participation were also observed in age groups and in home location. However, in this small study there appeared to be very little gender difference.

There must be serious concern about young people in poverty and living in rural locations. This group seems to be doubly disadvantaged. Their opportunities are diminished by restricted choice of satisfactory activities and issues of distance, as public and private transport may be both costly and unreliable.

The cost of attending out-of-school activities is a problem for young people on free school meals. This is often rationalised by describing themselves as non-attenders. In addition, young people on free school meals claimed to be committed to more demanding family arrangements. Whether this was cause or effect was difficult to verify in this small study.

It was notable that the young people on free school meals were able to clearly articulate a 'wish list' of activities they would like to do if they could. Responses indicated that most of what they wished for was already available and enjoyed by classmates. Very few of the more affluent group could think of things that they wanted to do but could not.

# 4 Conclusions and recommendations

## Introduction

We began this work from the premise that a key factor in improving educational attainment and subsequent life chances of young people in poverty was their confidence in, and understanding of, educational relationships with adults. Consequently, we determined to look beyond school-based experiences at how, and why, young people engage in learning through activities out of school. Our study addressed three questions:

- What do young people gain from engagement in out-of-school activities that involve a learning intent?
- Do young people from low-income families participate less in these activities than those from more affluent homes?
- If so, what can be done to redress the added disadvantage that this creates for young people in low-income families?

## Conclusions

Our findings clearly show that young people from families in receipt of free school meals participate in fewer organised out-of-school activities than their more affluent peers. The reasons for their non-participation were complex but the key factors were:

- cost, relating to both the activities themselves and, for young people living in rural areas, transport
- limited knowledge about how to realise access or confidence in doing so
- perceptions of self as an attendee of such activities.

These, we argue, augment the disadvantages of young people in poverty when it comes to negotiating the more formal learning environment encountered in school, as our findings show that young people gain a variety of skills and understandings from organised out-of-school activities.

At the most basic level the young people learned about the activity itself. They gain:

- specialist knowledge
- enhanced vocabularies
- an understanding of the importance of rules and roles in learning in a particular domain.

These enable them to understand that learning is active and to justify their own contributions to the learning process.

At a personal level the participants in out-of-school activities gain:

- improved self-control and confidence
- a breadth of experiences from an expanded peer group
- a more sophisticated understanding and articulation of themselves as learners
- the need to assume responsibility for performances and teamwork
- an understanding of the transferability of skills and knowledge into different contexts of learning.

The importance of the adults in the more organised and focused activities was also clear. The young people's views of the role that adults played in the activity and the educational relationships that were nurtured in the out-of-school setting were noticeably enhanced. Issues of importance were:

- the adults as role models
- the adults as co-learners
- the adults as leaders.

It was clear that knowing how to develop and sustain supportive educational relationships, how to work with others, and how to make sense of and build on each other's expertise (skills that are all vitally important in improving life chances) were learned through these activities. We suggest that these benefits occur because of the 'authenticity' of the learning (Roth and Lee, 2006). The out-of-school activities

were distinctive and beneficial because they were founded on authentic or genuine learning communities in a way that classrooms are not.

The learning in the out-of school contexts therefore complements the more academic learning that takes place in school and the informal learning that takes place in the home through its connectedness with the real world of adults. The distinctiveness of out-of-school learning lies in the cross-disciplinary connections that are crucial in developing transferable skills and in understanding that transferability within and across contexts. These transferable skills are evidenced by successful learners and are much demanded by employers (MacBeath, 2000).

All communities involve activities with commonly accepted rules and clear understanding of the disadvantages if these rules are not adhered to. Our interviews about out-of-school commitments emphasised that the adults involved were the keepers of the rules. They were not there purely to discipline, but to clarify the rule-governed activities. It is this that enables young people to gain a clear understanding of the role of authority. In talking to us, our interviewees were able to articulate the need to conform to rules if goals are to be achieved. They clearly perceived the authority held by the adults in the out-of-school activities to be legitimate and based on knowledge of the activity itself. All members of the group, adults and young people, were seen to make a real contribution to the learning of the community. Conversely, although this more sophisticated discernment was of consequence for its transference to teachers in the school setting, this is not how most young people engage with in-school activities:

Some teachers wind me up, I know they're older and they have the right to shout at us because they're teachers, but they just take advantage of us.

(14-year-old girl)

While it could be argued that this young person was still seeing the authority of schoolteachers as legitimate, the comment relates to the teachers' power, not their expertise in a particular domain. If the relationship between teachers and students in schools is to facilitate young people's learning the students need a clear understanding of how they are disadvantaged (rather than punished) if they do not subscribe to the rules. This goes beyond them seeing the need to work hard to pass examinations to their gaining a clearer perception of how the experience links not only to their future learning but also to the teachers' learning. It is the passion for the activity (subject) that is the common ground in an educational relationship.

How this passion can be maintained within a prescribed curriculum and a complex school day needs further exploration. We argue that it is those young people with a greater experience of a variety of educational relationships, with adults in a range of contexts, who are better able to build on this understanding to help them engage with teachers. In turn, the engagement with teachers develops young people's potential for learning in school where goals are less collective and authority more imposed. Our study shows that young people in poverty have less opportunity for such experiences and are therefore less likely to build good educational relationships within school.

## **Policy implications**

In its policy paper *Every Child Matters* the Government acknowledged the contribution of out-of-school activities to the well-being of young people. It pledged an initial budget of £200 million to 'increase the focus on activities for children out of school through the creation of a Young People's Fund' (HM Treasury, 2003, p. 7). While findings from our research suggest that this money could be well spent, we also uncover a complexity that needs to be understood if it is to be effectively spent. In launching its subsequent course of action, *Youth Matters*, the Government states that:

We want all young people to have happy, enriching, diverse experiences. We will ensure that a wide range of activities are made available for them to develop the personal, social and emotional skills needed to thrive in today's society and economy.  
(DfES, 2005c)

We believe our findings have several messages for the generalities articulated in that policy, although, as we have highlighted above, we think it is more than the 'personal, social and emotional skills' that young people gain from such activities. It is the key skills of learning gained that are so important for their full engagement and attainment in school. For young people in poverty, being able to access out-of-school activities easily, and on the same terms as their more affluent peers, could be an important starting point. To some extent this could have been addressed through the Opportunity Cards (DfES, 2006). Enabling such access through the provision of affordable clubs or concessionary transport could have real influence on young people's engagement with learning. However, as two of us identify elsewhere (Bullock and Wikeley, 2004), if participation is to be sustained, access needs to be seen as an entitlement for all rather than an expensive provision for an elite or an intervention for the disadvantaged. It is in their early teenage years that young

people are most concerned about being part of the crowd – not being identifiable as different. Activities or resources that are only accessible to young people labelled as being disadvantaged will be seen as imposed even if actual attendance is voluntary. The learning advantage that comes from the out-of-school activities is closely connected to the choices being made by attending.

What enthuses and transforms those young people who participate in out-of-school activities are the skills, efforts and motivation of committed adults. These adults are valued because they, too, are participating for recreation and enjoyment. They are not part of the establishment, nor do they have an ulterior motive beyond the successful outcomes of the group or club. This tension cannot easily be reconciled by the *Extended Schools* and *Youth Matters* policy thrust. While the policy argues for provision of 'a range of services and activities, often beyond the school day, to help meet the needs of children, their families and the wider community' (DfES, 2005a, p. 7), this is largely a vehicle for affordable childcare and more efficient provision of children's services. We suggest that out-of-school activities can have a more fundamental and valuable part to play in improving learning for all young people. It is this aspect that will work towards economic well-being for every child; but only if it conforms to the model of a genuine learning community outlined above.

There are implications here for the use of schools. For younger children schools can be an important part of the out-of-school provision; or, as suggested in the *Extended Schools* prospectus, school buildings can act as a facility for other providers in areas where such facilities are limited. But the *Extended Schools* prospectus is suggesting that secondary schools remain open only until 6 p.m., the time when most 14 year olds think the evening starts. The older children in our study often do not join school clubs but prefer off-site alternatives. It was clear that the activities in which the older group chose to participate were unconnected with school. Even when they might be perceived as the same activity (e.g. football, rugby, drama) they were seen as being very different and as having more authenticity in the adult world. The key message from our study has to be that the reason these young people were involved in all these activities was because they chose to be. As Roth and Lee (2006) comment, for learning communities to be real, free choice in terms of involvement and contribution is essential. While attendance at after-school clubs may not be compulsory, the very fact that they take place in the school buildings immediately at the end of the school day, while uniforms are still worn, makes them be perceived, in the eyes of some young people, as school activities.

What we have discovered may be described as a 'catch-22'. We argue that the learning that takes place in out-of-school activities is crucial and can have real implications for school engagement in terms of the educational relationships young

people form with teachers. If successful those relationships have an impact on self-efficacy: agency and motivation at school and on into lifelong learning. Therefore out-of-school activities are a 'good thing' for all learners. They should be encouraged and policymakers should address ways of making them accessible to all. However, endorsing such activities as part of the establishment often results in them becoming less attractive to young people. Further thought needs to be given to developing means of providing these activities, particularly to those currently without access to them, in a way that does not reduce their attractiveness.

Our findings have clear implications for youth services. High on the 'wish lists' of our free school meal 14 year olds were youth clubs, and more specifically 'good' youth clubs. While our study shows that involvement in specific organised clubs is particularly beneficial, the young people also engaged in educational relationships in the more generalist clubs. From our study it would appear that such clubs are heavily reliant on organisations not directly involved in youth services, such as churches, or in one case the police, for their provision. This was particularly true in the rural areas. Having somewhere to meet and engage in a variety of activities was important to the well-being of these young people. We came across one young person who with her friends had made a den 'by the golf course', in order to have somewhere to meet 'out of the rain. We had nothing to do so we thought we could make somewhere where we could hang around'. The den had recently been demolished as it had been appropriated by a tramp. Having places for which they feel a sense of ownership is important when engaging on equal terms with others.

A further issue was the dearth of non-sporting clubs in our sample areas. While we accept that it is possible that we picked areas with particular profiles, we have no reason to suspect that these areas were exceptional. For example, we were surprised at the lack of involvement of our interviewees in arts activities. The rural primary school had a popular drama club which was attended by eight of the young people of whom three were on free school meals. Only five other young people from the sample of 55 were involved in arts activities. Eleven-year-old Alice was learning the guitar, and Cheryl occasionally attended a dance club. Of the 14 year olds, Hilary was a member of several drama groups and intended to make it her career, Crystal talked of enjoying drawing in her own time and Celia did drumming with her father. Several of the young people in our study said they were not sporty and consequently felt excluded from out-of-school activities. How to broaden the range of activities on offer and make them accessible and attractive to young people warrants further investigation.

### Implications for practice

We are not arguing for schools to change, nor are we censuring schools for being unable to do what is blatantly impossible. Policymakers must accept that schools have particular parameters within which they need to work and that they provide a major (but not sole) contribution to the effective life chances of young people. Young people learn in a variety of contexts including home, school and out of school. All three of these strands are crucial and each contributes to strategies and practice that might inform and enhance the others. The value of out-of-school activities lies in their difference from school activities. But better out-of-school provision could have a notable impact on learning in schools. Our study clearly indicated that where this had occurred it was because young people's relationship with teachers had been changed. A key factor in facilitating this appeared to be the students' perceptions of the adults in the out-of-school activities as co-learners.

Educational relationships in authentic learning contexts are less hierarchical than those in schools and consequently young people have a better sense of their own agency. However, addressing the power imbalance is always going to be problematic for the relationship between teachers and students in schools. Prescribed curricula and syllabi which change little from year to year and contribute to high-stakes assessment will always put teachers in the role of the holders of the knowledge. Helping young people develop a sense of agency with respect to their own learning may be better done through out-of-school activities. Policymakers need to consider how this might best be provided.

# Notes

## Chapter 2

- 1 'R' refers to the respondent and 'I' to the interviewer.
- 2 The names of the young people have been changed to maintain anonymity.

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# Appendix 1: Activities map

## Appendix 1 Activities map

Name.....

Monday

Tuesday

Sunday

Wednesday



Saturday

Thursday

Friday

# Appendix 2: Interview schedule

## Part 1: Visual mapping of activities (done prior to interview – see Appendix 1)

Whoever is conducting this part of the research (e.g. researchers, teachers etc.) will ask pupils to think about a typical week: include things like seeing friends and watching television.

## Part 2: Clarification with interviewee at start of interview briefly for all activities

- Go through each day of the week
- Type of activity – note formal and informal
- Mark location activities
  - at home
  - after school (in school)
  - in neighbourhood
- Social relationships present
  - friends
  - other peers (age groups)
  - adults
- Access
  - What available in school/in neighbourhood?
    - Anything you want to do and don't? What/why can't?
    - Anything available don't want to do? Why not?
    - Anything wish was happening at school – why at school?
    - Anything wish was happening in neighbourhood – why in neighbourhood?
  - cost
  - transport
  - equipment.

## Part 3: Interview (referring to map)

### 1 *Explore selected activities (first selected by researcher as involving an adult in a key role; second selected by pupil)*

- Reasons for engagement
  - Why this particular activity?
  - What like about it?
  - Anything don't like about it?
  - Why do the others do it?
  - How important is it to you?
  - Other things you would rather do?
- Extent engagement
  - What do you do?
  - Regularity/duration?
  - What do the others do?
  - How does it work?
    - Who does what?
    - What do the adults bring to the activity?
    - What are the rules; how is behaviour governed?
    - Who decides what happens; any negotiations; how is conflict resolved?
  - Agency
    - Can you change anything?
    - How would you go about it?
  - Is (activity) like school or different (why/why not)?

### 2 *Exploring relationships*

- Relationship with adults at activity
  - How would you describe the adults involved: like/dislike; confidence; trust; ability to contribute to the activity?
  - How would they describe you: like/dislike; confidence; trust; contribution to activity?
  - Are they teachers – at your school? (If so are relationships with them different in and out of school; if so why/why not?)
  - Are they like teachers (why/why not)?

- Relationship with peers at activity
  - How would you describe the other young people involved: like/dislike; confidence; trust; contribution to the activity?
  - How would they describe you: like/dislike; confidence; trust; contribution to activity?
  - Are they friends? Does their being so/not being so make a difference?

### **3     *Learning connections***

- Do you think you learn anything from participating in this activity?
  - What do you learn?
  - Role of others in helping you do that?
  - Do you want to improve?
  - How important is it?
  - Is there anything you learn that you can use in other ways, e.g. at school?  
Skills? Knowledge? Personal traits?
  
- Do your schoolteachers know you do this activity?

### **4     *Non-activities***

- What do you do when not at any activities?
  - alone
  - with others or with adults present.

