







A school-based programme to prepare underachieving young men for work

All young people need appropriate preparation for the rapidly changing workplace. However, underachieving boys and young men appear to be especially reluctant to seek and accept advice, while being particularly badly affected by recent changes in the work environment. The 'Into Work' project, carried out by Working With Men, aimed to develop an appropriate programme targeted at young men (aged 14 and 15), within a school setting. The project found that:

-  Most of the young men responded very quickly to the practical nature of the programme. They saw the relevance for their futures and engaged with enthusiasm.
-  An unexpected result was that many of the young men reported that the programme helped them to refocus on their school work and enabled them to identify what they could get from school before they left.
-  All the young men chose to be assessed on the basis of competence levels (rather than attendance), in spite of their 'underachieving' status. They wanted their skills to be measured, but not by written examination.
-  The programme worked because the workers always used a practical focus, discussion-based materials and – most importantly – engaged with the young men individually and expected them to do the same.
-  Schools took some time to integrate the programme into the curriculum. There were initial difficulties in identifying appropriate young men to participate. Schools preferred those 'at risk' to be in core and option lessons; they tended to see problems as the young men's inability to use what the school had to offer, rather than difficulties with what was on offer. Schools often looked at the short-term value of non-curricular programmes, rather than the longer term.
-  A particular set of skills and approaches was required to develop this type of programme with underachieving young men. As New Deal, Connexions and a range of other initiatives target this group, there may be a skills shortage among those able and willing to work with underachieving young men.

Introduction

In 1999, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation supported Working With Men in carrying out a piece of research entitled *'Young men, the job market and gendered work'*. While the focus was on young men's attitudes towards 'women's work', one major finding was that most of the young men interviewed felt poorly prepared for the workplace. Most of the 63 young men in the study were on the margins of both school and the workplace. Most, on reflection, thought that school had been a missed opportunity. Many were full of regret that they did not try harder and engage more actively within the school environment.

The research was followed up with a practical piece of work within schools. The aim was to develop a programme that would effectively prepare socially excluded young men for the workplace. The same programme was delivered in all schools. 'Into Work' consisted of school-based sessions on the following themes:

- interview experience;
- telephone experience;
- completion of application forms and CVs;
- exploration of training options on leaving school;
- where and how to look for jobs;
- being a man in the workforce;
- opportunities to discuss possible career options, incorporated during (and after) the sessions.

In addition, there were three opportunities for half-day workplace visits (of the young men's choice), and a visit to the local college, Jobcentre and careers office.

Engaging the young men

The schools suggested the project work with young men who were disengaged with at least part of the curriculum.

The 'Into Work' programme engaged the young men very quickly, and they saw its relevance straight away. They found the focus on their futures, their aspirations and what they wanted to do very attractive. The young men also found that the focus on practical skills and interactive methods fitted their preferred learning styles. They were encouraged to take the course seriously, and were expected to behave like adult men (both in the school-based sessions and on workplace visits). Classroom management techniques were rarely needed; a

reminder of the purpose of the course was usually all that was required to get individuals focused.

The young men were helped in engaging with the programme by: explicit conversations about 'behaving and being treated like men'; using an approach that encouraged individual exploration rather than information retention; and support for the development of skills.

Programme benefits

The young men reported that as a result of their involvement in the programme, they felt more confident about their skills and their learning. Remarks such as the course *"made me realise how much I had to offer"*, *"gave me more confidence in approaching other people"*, *"taught me not to be afraid to get some help"*, and *"I know what to say so I don't get scared in an interview"* were commonplace.

The programme increased the young men's understanding and knowledge. They made such comments as: *"I now understand the workplace a lot more"*; *"I know how a college works"*; and *"I know what to expect at college"*. It also helped them to identify barriers they would need to overcome: *"helped me realise it is not easy to get a job"*, *"planning is vital"*, *"employers expect a lot when interviewing"*, *"I now know what skills I need"*, and *"made me realise I have to work harder"*.

While the project team hoped that these would be the benefits of participation, one of the more unexpected results was that the course helped to refocus the young men on their school work. They made such comments as *"the course helped me remember the qualifications that I will need"*, and *"I know what subjects I need to concentrate on"*.

Since the delivery of the programme, the schools have reported a change in attitude for some of the young men, and a change in attitude towards particular subjects for most of the young men.

Opting for competence assessment

The young men were offered two options for assessment: on the basis of attendance; or on the basis of attendance, their interviewing and telephone skills, and their knowledge of the workplace. They were offered an attendance certificate, a competence certificate and a reference (to be written on the basis of their abilities and skills demonstrated during the course and the assessment process).

In spite of their 'underachieving' status, all of the young men chose the competence option, with the

reference being the most attractive part of the package. The assessment process was rigorous and spread over two separate days. The young men approached the two days very seriously, and all of them passed, despite nerves, upset and excitement. They came in earlier for 'coaching sessions', and some described the evaluation as the best component of the course.

Many of the young men were very enthusiastic about measuring themselves and taking 'exams' in this form, although they were much less enthusiastic about written examinations. This raises important questions about expectations of young men, their confidence levels and appropriate forms of assessment.

Schools' need to adapt to gain the benefits

A number of difficulties had to be resolved with the participating schools. Initially, they wanted the project to work with those young men who were very much on the edges of the school community. Often, schools' expectations of the programme included a dramatic change in the young men's attitude and behaviour, and that the programme would primarily be working towards 'reintegrating' the young men into mainstream school. There was a strong tension between schools' expectations and the aims for the programme, which centred on the young men's workplace needs.

A range of practical problems also arose, over workplace visits (time out of school), available classrooms and timetabling to avoid core curriculum lessons. Some of these problems arose because negotiations and ongoing contact about running the programme were with teachers or school managers already carrying a full teaching load.

Schools were often trapped in short-term, problem-based planning, which created barriers to integrating a programme such as 'Into Work'. However, schools' attitudes changed after the completion of the programme, as they saw more long-term benefits.

Workers' need for particular skills

In delivering the programme, every attempt was made to develop a coherent model that took into account:

- the engagement difficulties that schools identified;
- the young men's own views of these difficulties;

- the young men's motivation for engaging with the programme;
- methods and materials that would be practical and relevant;
- the quality of the relationships between the worker and the young men.

This complex set of factors required project workers to possess a group of skills that hinged on understanding young men and being able to engage with them. The young men needed to engage with the worker early on in the programme, or most of the other factors would be seriously inhibited. A set of skills were identified as essential for programmes such as 'Into Work' to be effective with underachieving young men.

Impending skills shortage

Significant initiatives such as Connexions, strategies to combat underachievement and the more focused role of the careers services are not targeted specifically at boys and young men. However, they are all expected to significantly involve and have an impact on particular groups of young men.

The skills and approaches identified in the 'Into Work' project are not necessarily possessed by those workers who are expected to lead initiatives targeted at young men. This may lead to a severe skills shortage (or a failure to engage and work effectively) within these initiatives.

Conclusion

The young men were noticeably resistant to seeking and accepting advice. However, the 'Into Work' programme seemed to succeed because it:

- was practical and easily applicable to the workplace;
- built on young men's confidence;
- helped them to think and find out;
- provided them with individual and thematic help;
- expected a lot of them;
- used materials that encouraged them to work out what they thought, and what questions they themselves had.

Similar programmes may have a valuable refocusing function for some 'at risk' young men.

The 'Into Work' programme had some predictable and some less predictable outcomes. Young men learnt about the workplace, felt more

confident and developed workplace-related skills as a result of their participation. Less predictably, the programme also helped to refocus them within school, and helped them to identify the importance of getting the examination results they needed for their career development.

Young men who are thought to be 'at risk', 'socially excluded' or 'underachieving' reflect a very broad range of behaviours, attitudes and difficulties. Schools tend to offer outside programmes to those on the verge of being excluded, reflecting a 'band aid' approach to prevention. A more sophisticated, longer-term approach that identifies those genuinely 'at risk' to take part in programmes such as 'Into Work' is required if additional activities – built into the curriculum – are to make a serious impact on underachievement.

Schools need to become even more flexible in their approach and attitudes towards life-related, non-academic programmes such as 'Into Work'. Schools are unable to deliver programmes such as this, partly because of the pressure of the national curriculum, but also because the benefit is to particular individuals who need help to identify the potential value of their school experience.

With funding streams and initiatives being (at least in part) targeted at 'at risk' young men, professional training will need to meet this new challenge. Teachers, careers officers, youth workers and Connexions staff require a highly developed understanding of young men and the specific skills needed to work with them effectively.

About the project

Fifty-one young men (aged 14 to 15) in year 10 participated in a classroom and workplace-based programme of 30 hours delivered within three South London schools. The school had identified them as being 'at risk' and all were underachieving in at least part of the curriculum. The programme concentrated on practical approaches and methods, and aimed to develop skills (and attitudes) essential to the rapidly changing workplace. Working With Men develops innovative projects, especially with young men, in the areas of health, work, violence, fatherhood and identity. Working With Men also develops curriculum materials, produces publications, offers consultancy and training to other professionals wanting to develop their work with boys and young men.

How to get further information

The full report, **Underachieving young men preparing for work: A report for practitioners** by Trefor Lloyd, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 060 1, price £17.95). It is available from York Publishing Services Ltd, 64 Hallfield Road, Layerthorpe, York YO31 7ZQ, Tel: 01904 430033, Fax: 01904 430868, email: orders@yps-publishing.co.uk. (Please add £2.00 p&p per order.) You can also download this report free from www.jrf.org.uk (ISBN 1 84263 090 3).

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