Successful futures?

Community views on adult education and training

Helen Bowman, Tom Burden and John Konrad

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Acknowledgements

1 Introduction

This report is based on a study conducted in an area of social disadvantage and as such concentrates on those who have little financial or social leverage. It should be remembered in reading the report that the picture painted here of people's lives and their decisions to participate or not participate in education and/or training is not claimed to be typical of everyone. It will, however, have resonance with those who are similarly socially disadvantaged and with those who are attempting to widen participation in education and training provision.

The report has five main sections:

- Aims, context and method of the current research.

- Successful futures, participation and the themes that have come out of our data.

- Conclusions.

- Our data and the current policy framework.

- Policy implications.

2 Aims

The aim of the research is to explore the current models of education and training and people's decisions to participate in the available provision in terms of conceptions of 'successful futures'. In doing this we wish to provide better explanations for participation and non-participation in education and training. Emphasis has been placed on the way in which the option of education and training fits within a range of perceived opportunities and options that people view as being available within the locality. We have focused on the relative importance of social, economic and cultural factors in influencing people's aspirations, and explored the roles of social networks in the processes and perceptions of educational and occupational recruitment (Perri 6, 1997).

By focusing on people's perceptions and conceptualisations of education, training, learning and work we are attempting to find out how people make sense of, and are materially affected by, the implementation of policies in these areas. This is expressed in the research questions that the study tackles.

What are people's perceptions of their own 'successful futures', and how are these influenced by their perception of:

- their own experiences of education and the workplace

- their local community

- the place of different forms of work (paid, intermediate and voluntary) and training and education

- the local labour market

- the informal sector and the opportunities it offers

- the opportunities for training and education provided by local adult education provision

- forms of support available in the community, including social and community networks?

3 Context

Although the general perception is that the city in the study has a booming economy, it contains within it marginalised communities and groups that are not fully benefiting from this prosperity (Sanderson and Campbell, 1996). Within the community studied there are socially excluded groups with low levels of educational attainment and poor economic circumstances, groups that are particularly vulnerable to dips in the local economy. For example, the research site is one of the wards in the City's Inner Area which comprises 12 of the 33 wards in the city. In the updated index of deprivation (1998), ten of these 12 wards (including the research site) were in the 10 per cent most deprived in the UK. In the City's Inner Area the number of unemployed and the unemployment rates are high, whereas in the rest of the Metropolitan District they are low. The opposite is true for skill levels and incomes (Leeds TEC Ltd, 1998).

The Learning Centre, which was the focus of the study, developed out of the closure of a secondary school in the centre of a large council estate in 1996. The establishment of the Learning Centre represents an acknowledgement of the need for a new approach to the delivery of education and training and for appropriate opportunities for learning. The Centre is run as a partnership of education providers under the management of the City Council. Administration and managerial staff are employed by the City Council but local Further Education colleges run and staff the courses available. In stark contrast with other Further Education facilities available around the city all courses are currently free, along with childcare for the under fives.

The Centre also acts as a base for a variety of city-wide projects, and in a short space of time it has achieved national and international acclaim. In spite of this success, there remains a concern that the more excluded sections of the community have been untouched by the Centre. Amongst these are many young people, some of whom are not registered for benefits, placing themselves outside the scope of government and unemployment and training policies (Pearce and Hillman, 1998).

Around the Learning Centre there are a variety of other local community and education centres that were also accessed by those who were interviewed as part of the research. These are listed below with their title, as they are referred to in the research, in brackets:

Local council-run Community Centres (Community Centres)

Targeted at both men and women, the Community Centre was primarily concerned with social support. Representatives from social services, local education providers and youth and community groups were available on site. Some, non-accredited courses were open to all, often responding to local interest, like video history.

A local council-run Children's Centre (Children's Centre)

Also targeted at men and women, the Children's Centre concentrates on social, parental support and guidance in parenting, with childcare available. There are some accredited courses available, often run in response to requests from those attending, tackling a perceived need such as assertiveness. Advice and information are available via

contacts with the Centre workers, especially around childhood and adult physical and mental health issues. Contact was also made from this Centre out in the community via door knocking and leafleting around local shops.

A local Family Service Unit (Family Unit)

The women who were interviewed from the Family Service Unit were involved in the aspect of the Unit's work which concentrated on social and educational support through accessible courses in childcare, with childcare available for women. Information and guidance on work and education issues were very prominent for this group, especially as the European funding used for this initiative was specifically targeted at helping women into work.

4 Methods

Qualitative methods were used in the study as befits the research design. The analysis of the data, using concept mapping (Novak and Gowin, 1984; Miles and Huberman, 1994) allowed us to explore both the mapping and the construction of perceptions and conceptions, using concept propositional analysis. In this approach concepts are analysed through the propositions in which they are articulated, rather than as abstract, decontextualised notions. The Nud.ist Vivo (Nvivo) (v.1.1 QSR 1999) program for qualitative data analysis was used to store, search and develop the data using pattern analysis, both to better understand the complexity of the data and to develop and model theories which emerged in the process of analysis (Richards and Richards, 1999).

The study had two main phases of data collection and analysis. The initial phase of the study involved gaining access to the research site, making contact with local education providers and community centres, and organising and running exploratory focus groups. The data from the focus groups were analysed and used to develop the schedule for the semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in the second and main phase of the study. The phases of data collection are described in more detail below.

Focus groups

We used the existing agencies and their staff who work in the area to make initial contact with the centres' users. These staff were crucial in organising focus group discussions, as the common link of the community centre or education provider was often the only thing which linked the group participants (see also Bers, 1994).

In the more formal setting of the Learning Centre where provision is much more fully associated with education and training, the staff at the partner colleges have been our initial source of making contact with people. Whilst they have introduced us to students, they have themselves remained distant from any association with the project and its aims. We have also gained access to those people who are on work based schemes, but who are not necessarily studying at the Learning Centre. To do this we liaised with the Employment Access team at the site who arranged for us to meet with a group from the Job Placement Programme (JPP) and a group from the Gateway New Deal (GND).

A total of nine focus groups with 31 users of various local centres were carried out. The focus groups were attended mainly by women (n=22) and most of these had children. A total of nine men took part in the focus groups. The difficulty of making contact with men was a problem throughout the research and has also been reported in other studies (Lloyd, 1999; McGivney, 1999a).

Interviews

In-depth interviews were conducted with 88 people around the research site. These are broken down by age and gender in Table 1.

Contact was made with interviewees through the Learning Centre, the Children's Centre, the Family Unit and through a supported independent living unit in the area. The main interviewer (Helen Bowman) also made contact with potential interviewees through leafleting around local shops and door knocking (two days) with workers from the Children's Centre.

Table 1 Age and gender of people interviewed

Age range	Male	Female	Total
16–19	14	9	23
20–30	9	17	26
31–40	5	13	18
41–50	4	6	10
51–60	3	2	5
60 +	3	3	6
Total	38	50	88

5 Successful futures

In this chapter we discuss the notion of 'successful futures' and in particular how interviewees framed their perceptions of successful futures through participation in education and work.

The focus on 'successful futures' in this study reflects current moves in post-compulsory education to market provision in terms of individualistic notions of self-improvement. This is by no means a new concept but is built on a tradition of self-improvement through education (Smiles, 1859; Coffield, 1999). What is new about the current move amongst colleges to market their provision in this way is its explicit link with the widening participation agenda of the education and employment policies of the current government. Whereas in the past planning for a career through education activity was characteristic of a middle class approach to employment, the current emphasis on educational attainment as a pathway to a successful future is being held up as an ideal for everyone (Hyland, 1999; Coffield, 1999).

Perceptions of 'successful futures' were explored in the interviews. The interview data suggest that a useful way to understand perceptions of successful futures in relation to participation in education is through *beliefs in* and *doubts about* education. It became clear in the analysis of the data that at the same time as holding positive beliefs in the role of education in their lives, many people might also harbour doubts about it.

Participation and non-participation

The data from the interviews and focus groups suggest that the classification of people into categories such as participants and non-participants, learners and non-learners, achievers and low achievers, or even reluctant learners and whoever their 'opposites' are, is an oversimplification (Eraut, 1999). The evidence suggests that these dualisms do not reflect the role of education and training in people's lives, nor the various ways in which people perceive and experience the relationships between education, training and work throughout their lives.

Participation and non-participation are not useful as opposites that characterise people. What is clear from our study is that at any point in time there are those who are currently accessing educational facilities that are mainstream and those who are not, although they may be doing other education related activities instead. We take mainstream to mean that courses are provided by further education colleges or recognised training providers and lead to accreditation, and more often than not nowadays, some form of qualification including key skills, NVQs and various forms of computer accreditation for software and hardware skills. These are the people in the current study who we have called 'participants' in education. For the purposes of this study this includes all the interviewees who were studying at the Learning Centre.

However, there are also those who are participating in courses run by local education providers as part of centres which have other remits to do with child and family welfare, such as the Children's Centre and the Family Unit in this study. Whilst these could also be described as participants in some form of mainstream education this is not their main orientation, or rather their main orientation is on the family, with some subsidiary notion of personal

development through education over the long term. Most of these interviewees are not accessing the Learning Centre and are in an ill-defined area of non-participation for the purposes of this study.

The third set of interviewees were those who said that they were not currently engaged in any form of education and training even though some of them did attend non-accredited courses at a local Community Centre (albeit on a casual basis). It was rare for interviewees over 18 to have had absolutely no contact with education or training provision since leaving school, but these interviewees who described themselves as not currently accessing education have also been called non-participants for the purposes of our study.

Owing to the complex and changing relationships between education, training and work in people's lives it is impossible to present a simple structure to represent the evidence in our data. What we intend to do is to present our arguments through the themes which emerged from our analysis of the beliefs in and doubts about education that were evident in the focus groups and in-depth interviews, illustrating these with quotations.

Beliefs in and doubts about education

Beliefs

These are the beliefs that individuals can do something to themselves through education and training that will improve their chances of employment. These beliefs are most evident in the interviewees who are participating in education and are explained as accommodating education in their lives (even though they may also have contradictory experiences of the

education/work pathway).

Yeah, well when you go they're there to help and give you opportunities and stuff and that's it. If you go and take part in it you can choose and then it'll be your future and you can aim for targets to do and if you persevere it can be a bright future. (I65; Age 21–30, Female, Jobseeker's Allowance)

Doubts

Doubts refer to the unease that arises from the gap between personal experiences and the assumptions made in policy models of education and work. These doubts show where assumptions about the role of education in life can break down and how this can undermine interviewees' beliefs in their own agency and potential in education, training and work. These are essentially doubts in the potential for the education provision presented to lead in some way to a successful future.

… if you've had nothing but shit all your life and somebody says we can make you a success you're not going to believe them are you. (I58; Age 21–30, Male, Incapacity Benefit)

Themes

In the interviews it is apparent that there are contradictory influences at play in people's beliefs about, and experiences of, the relationships between education, training and work. These contradictions can support interviewees in doubting or believing in the role of education in achieving a successful future. Doubts in the role of participation in education were related to interviewees' perceptions of the *lack of a clear link* in one or more of the following,

whilst belief in the role of education was related to the perception of *a clear link* in one or more, of the following:

- educational achievement and work opportunities

- educational self-concept and the provision being presented

- personal goals and the education provision being presented

- circumstantial factors (having children, work commitments, lack of support, financial hardship) and the education provision being presented.

Each of these is discussed in detail below using extracts from the interviews.

It is important to note that while people may have doubts about some of these they may feel positive about others and vice versa. For example, an interviewee may feel that qualifications do not necessarily lead to employment (the first bullet point), whilst feeling that their current circumstances would allow them to participate in some form of education provision on offer (the last bullet point). Or an interviewee might want to learn more about computing and want to attend a computer course on offer (the third bullet point) but doubt their own ability in the learning environment (the second bullet point).

Educational achievement and work opportunities

Some of the interviewees who were already participating in education and training at the Learning Centre were oriented towards learning for work. What is striking about interviewees'

discussions of the route through education to work, however, is the heavy emphasis laid on enjoying jobs.

Work as intrinsically important was one of the most common themes that came out of the interviews both with those who were, and those who were not working or participating in education, across all age groups. By intrinsic we mean that the interviewees were primarily concerned that work was personally meaningful. Interviewees identified enjoyment as the most important but often unattainable goal of working.

If enjoying work was not their current experience, interviewees saw it variously as a realistic goal, as an ideal that was dreamt of, or as a lie that people told themselves. This links very clearly with the overarching theme that came out of the interviews which was that there are contradictions at play in people's personal experiences of work through education.

This means that projecting themselves into work opportunities that offer enjoyment is not always easy, feasible or realistic for interviewees even though this was the most common image of a successful future. The suggestion that there is an easily negotiated pathway from school to job to career, with its implications of fulfilment and challenge, is therefore questioned even while it obviously underpins some interviewees' educational activities and/or work ambitions.

Interviewees discussed education routes into working in relation to four particular areas:

- qualifications

- enjoyment

- employability and alternative routes into work

- discrimination.

Qualifications

In the white paper *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999b), the government stated that 'learning helps to bring qualifications up to date'. Interviewees were asked to respond to this statement. Those who expressed doubt as to the nature of the relationship between educational achievement and work opportunities were suspicious of the value of qualifications in general and sceptical of employers' perceptions of qualifications in appointing new staff.

The qualifications system was identified as being confusing and questionable. The confusion arose from the amount and variety of qualifications available and their perceived worth and value. NVQs were treated with particular suspicion. Several of the interviewees questioned the worth of NVQs in comparison with City and Guilds.

> *An NVQ is an insult. I know a lot of people who do them but an NVQ is an insult. You work very hard for a City and Guilds. They are like gold dust they really are.* (W2; Age 21–30, Female, Income Support, Focus Group 4)

One of the elements of interviewees' suspicions of qualifications was their suspicion of the credibility of the qualification and what it said about their educational ability; again NVQs were mentioned specifically more than once.

> *I went straight onto an IT Level 2 course, NVQ Level 2. There is no such thing as Level 1. You know, who wants Level 1? That is for morons.* (M3; Age 31–40, Male, Job Placement Programme, Focus Group 6)

Interviewees were also unsure as to employers' perceptions of these qualifications and some had had personal experience of being turned away because of their qualifications.

> *When I passed my NVQ 2 in IT – I went to an employer with my certificate and he said 'do you know the real meaning of NVQ?'. I said 'no – what's that?' He says 'Not Very Qualified – now bugger off'.* (M3; Age 31–40, Male, Job Placement Programme, Focus Group 6)

The post-16 qualifications system has changed dramatically over the last ten years with the introduction of General and National Vocational Qualifications. Our data show that some potential employees doubt the coherence and the consistency of the system and that they feel some employers express the same confusion. It appeared that contact with various education institutions in achieving qualifications had done little to clarify their confusion. It did seem, however, that no matter how sceptical interviewees were about qualifications they had done, this was not in itself enough to stop them from ever thinking about doing qualifications in the future.

For the 16–19 year olds who were participating at the time of the interviews, education leading to work opportunities was linked to their school experience which they had completed, but which they had left with few or no qualifications. These interviewees seemed to express themselves in absolutes and extremes. The interviewees participating in education at the Learning Centre had taken teachers' and parents' exhortations to work at school or fail forever, very seriously.

Because it's a second chance it's called. You don't get many chances in life these days. I am 19 now and this is the last chance I will ever get to get qualifications – so I want to take it and hopefully get what I want out of it. If somebody like me gets a second chance then I would recommend they take it. (P4; Age 16–19, Male, Jobseeker's Allowance)

Similarly these students placed great store in qualifications for getting work.

Well you do need qualifications ... (I14)

Do you think qualifications help you to get jobs?

Yes definitely. Yeah, because you can't get anywhere without any qualifications. If you're going for a job and they say 'have you got any qualifications?' and you say 'no' you'll get asked to go back to college and get some. (I14; 16–19, Male, Jobseeker's Allowance)

It was these students who believed, almost fervently, in the role of education for gaining work. They viewed themselves as responsible for their own actions and trusted employers and education and training providers to guide them appropriately through the system. What they lacked was explicit knowledge of: the system as a system; their own capabilities within it; and the education and training requirements of the work opportunities they were pursuing, including the appropriate qualifications. Thus whilst these students subscribe to the general picture that is painted for them in school and by parents, their discussions of their experiences appear to raise questions about the assumptions made about the link between education and work which they have only just started to make sense of.

And do you think qualifications are important?

Yeah because some jobs you can't go into. Like I applied for a job, I mean I had some qualifications like Maths and English, Science and everything, but it wasn't the standards that they wanted. I think you need to have qualifications. Then it's like – if you haven't got qualifications then you'll be on a low pay but if you have you'll be on an all right pay. (I15; 16-19, Female, Jobseeker's Allowance)

Some of the learning opportunities being taken by this age range (at the Learning Centre) were very effective in raising their levels of qualifications and crucially, but slowly, developing their understanding of education and its relationship with the labour market. If their expectations are unrealistic, however, those who are currently accessing education facilities may become disenchanted and leave before they are able to achieve their short-term targets.

The situation was different for those across all age ranges who had no qualifications at all and were not currently participating at the Learning Centre. These interviewees had particular jobs in mind, which they had done in the past and would do in the future that would not need qualifications; these included cleaning and working in shops and bars, serving behind counters. It was clear that these interviewees perceived qualifications as only being necessary for particular jobs, jobs that they themselves were unlikely to apply for.

Do you think qualifications are important?

Yeah if you want to get a good job. You have to have qualifications and that, don't you? So yeah. (I23)

And are you interested in getting qualifications at all?

Not really. (I23; Age 16–19, Male, Working part time)

For the older interviewees who were participating at the Learning Centre, the experience of accessing education for qualifications was linked with self-development and general educational and self-improvement, as well as gaining qualifications for particular job opportunities. Whilst most of the interviewees saw some sort of link between educational achievement and work opportunities, what distinguished the participants was their perception of themselves as having a realistic chance of taking advantage of education to improve or further their job prospects.

I think it is vital, education for work. If you take an unskilled job, if you are educated you have got that choice haven't you whereas if you are just unskilled and you are not educated you have no choice. (I3)

This woman had been a teacher and was quite convinced of the worth of education and training in improving opportunities, even though her own experience of work had ended quite negatively.

And what do you think the role of work is in your life?

Well I think work should be job satisfaction. It should be a hobby really but I mean in 90 per cent it isn't is it. Work should be enjoyable. It should be that you don't go there just for, I mean you do go for the money obviously, but you go because you like going and you like the work. Which

unfortunately is really hard to do. (I3; Age 51–60, Female, Retired)

It is clear that whilst work may not be all that people would like it to be, it is still deemed by many to be a worthwhile pursuit to gain better employment prospects through educational qualifications. From our data it would seem that at times the link between education and work can become broken or weakened. This happens when:

- The qualifications system is so complicated as to cause confusion and scepticism as to the value and credibility of qualifications amongst employers and potential employees.

- People are unsure of the vagaries of the route from qualifications to work and treat it as synonymous with the simplified model assumed by policy in which qualifications lead automatically to work.

- People feel that qualifications are unnecessary because the work they are likely to do can be accessed without them.

It is clear from the interview data that even while expressing beliefs in the link between education achievement and work opportunities there are aspects of the qualification system and the experience of working that are contradictory. People can take qualifications that don't lead to the type or level of employment they want, but still believe that qualifications are worthwhile. They can spend their life working in a job they don't enjoy but still believe that it is possible to enjoy work. The interviews suggest that people find ways to live with their contradictory notions and experiences of the system. The most

frequently and strongly held desire, however, was that work can and should be enjoyable.

Enjoyment

The older (19+) interviewees who were currently participating in education linked the enjoyment of work to the process of engaging in education to improve their prospects. For those who were considering re-entering the labour market after a break, the enjoyment of work was linked very clearly with choosing to work or not. These interviewees who were not currently participating at the Learning Centre emphasised the negative effects of doing work that is not enjoyable.

> *And what do you think the role of work is?*
>
> *It has got to be enjoyable. It has got to be. You can't just have a money job.* (I38)
>
> *What would happen if you had just a money job?*
>
> *I wouldn't do it. Well I would but it would be soul destroying so it wouldn't be worth it.* (I38; Age 21–30, Female, Income Support)

As indicated above, certain types of jobs were perceived to be associated with commitment and motivation. These were characterised as decent jobs. The distinction between decent and other jobs has been discussed in other studies and more specifically in relation to young men (Lloyd, 1999).

> *Because obviously if I go into a job that I am not going to like I am going to be back on the dole within a few months and I don't want that. I want to be able to get into a job that I really want to do and that I will stick to.* (W1; Age 16–19, Female, Jobseeker's Allowance)

This interviewee was not alone in feeling that she should not be pressured into working rather than learning in order to get off benefit but instead should be helped into appropriate training for work that she wants to do. Experiences of living on benefits were described in negative terms by all interviewees who had done this at some point in their lives.

Interviewees were at pains to point out that non-instrumental factors play a crucial role in choosing to work. This was also true for the interviewees who were already in work. For example, the aim of obtaining a decent job through promotion or labour market mobility was linked in people's minds to the existence of better types of jobs and how obtaining these contributed to their sense of personal achievement.

> *Well I think I can do better than what I am doing now. At the moment all I am is goods inwards – receipting goods and putting them on the shelves and stock counts. But I think I can do a bit better than that myself.* (I1)
>
> *And what is that, doing a bit better, what is that about?*
>
> *My achievement.* (I1; 31–40, Male, Employed full time).

Interviewees described better types of jobs as being a mixture of employer related (who they work for), content related (what they do) and status related (how they are perceived and rewarded for what they do), but not necessarily all three. In response to a question about whether the point of doing qualifications was to move within his current workplace, this interviewee replied:

Not even it being a supermarket. I want to go into a better place where there is a good office and use skills there. Because in a supermarket place like, for getting up there it takes ages and it just looks like a lower class kind of station. (Age 21–30, Male, Employed full time)

Where better jobs were content-related they were either specifically *not* doing what the interviewee was already employed to do (mainly cleaning), or alternatively doing what the interviewee *wanted* to do. When asked, the women interviewed specified where and who they wanted to work with. The majority wanted to work with children and a couple wanted to work in an office and one in a bar, whereas the men specified skills they wanted to do such as driving, catering, car design, computer programming and music production. One said he wanted to work in a hospital as a radiographer and had also applied to be a social worker.

The place of work was mentioned in relation to job stability and pleasant environment. Many of the people in the study had been made redundant or suffered the closure of a firm at some point, and sometimes more than once in their lives. It was interesting that the education providers, community and children's centres and family unit in the area were positively associated with employment experiences and opportunities offering positive and pleasant work environments for job placements and part-time positions.

For example, this woman explicitly distinguished between work in the factory environment and work with children. She identifies factory work with negative work experiences (she had worked in a factory for a few days) and childcare with the social and useful nature of the work.

I want to do something. I want to do something. I am 24 now and I want to do something. I am never going to work so I might as well go out and get some certificates and if I do want to go and work at least I have got something there to say that I have passed this stuff. (I32)

When you say you are never going to work do you mean …

I mean for a company and stuff like that. You know like going to work and packing stuff and stuff like that. I would like to go and do something like childcare. I would like to work in a nursery with kids. (I32)

And what is the difference between packing stuff and working in a nursery?

Well you are round little kids and you can help them with things and when you are in a factory doing stuff like that, people just give you dirty looks and that all the time. When you go to a school like you can help little kids read and stuff like that and meet loads of new friends. (I32; Age 21–30, Female, Income Support)

Although better status jobs also offered better pay and better working conditions, these factors were not identified as stimulating progression in work in themselves, but as reflecting the greater achievement required for the better position. What was vital for job progression was that there was space for progress available.

I think it was working for British Rail that did it. Because I started off as a carriage cleaner and I hated it. I said I would give it six months, if I don't

like it then I would find another job. But I stuck it and then a job come up, that was as a railman and then a job came up as leading railman which is like ten pounds a week more but is in a different job. That was all clearing tables, putting bin liners in and things. I did that and that was better cos I hated cleaning, so I thought well I can do better than this, I know I can. So then I got another job as a sort of issuer. I put in for it and I got it and that was working shifts and I didn't really want that but I stuck at it and I did it and then a job come up as permanent days on goods inwards. So I put in for it and I got it. And that's where I am now. (I1)

So it is steps that you have taken isn't it, each time.

Yeah, building myself up and thinking I can do better than this. (I1)

Yeah. And did that happen in the other jobs?

No. In the other jobs that was it, that was all I was going to do. (I1)

Yeah. So how long were you in each job for?

I worked at the undertakers for ten years. (I1)

There were several interviewees who identified having the space to progress in work as crucial in order to develop both educationally and in the workplace. This interviewee specifically noted that he wanted to be in charge of his first foray into learning rather than being monitored through a work-training programme.

But I didn't really want to do that because all I wanted to do was just get the general and then sort of build up from that to see if I like it because I didn't like school. (I1; Age 31–40, Male, Working full time)

It would seem then that the desire to be comfortable at work, to have the space to progress and to enjoy work at least some of the time, are the key motivators for getting people into work after a break and to encourage them to progress once they are working. It is not apparent that these factors are always linked with education and training although progression certainly is.

In summary, notions of work that is enjoyable seem to be related to:

- achieving childhood ambitions: 'I've always wanted to …'

- making hobbies and interests into work

- performing socially useful tasks

- progressing and achieving beyond a current level.

What is apparent here is that the perceived quality of jobs is linked very strongly with personal and intrinsic reasons to work, rather than 'goal oriented rational action towards the pursuit of material rewards' assumed in the policy framework – described below.

Whilst some of the women with children were unsure about their desire to work because of family commitments, most of the interviewees were keen to work. An area of confusion, however, was in predicting what employers were looking for in appointing staff. This issue is dealt with below.

Employability and alternative routes to employment

Employability
In the White Paper *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999b) the government states that

'employability is the best guarantee for employment'. Interviewees were asked to respond to this statement and this caused them some concern. Firstly the statement was often felt to be nonsensical but beyond that it also roused some quite strong opinions in relation to the following:

- *Individual presentation*. When asked what they thought 'employability' meant, some interviewees talked about being 'presentable', 'smart' and 'having a good personality'. It was obvious that these aspects of individual presentation were assumed by those interviewed to be absolutely standard but were by no means a guarantee for employment.

- *Employers' expectations*. The attributes that interviewees felt employers were looking for were those of being 'hard working', 'good', 'willing to work', 'older' with years of work behind you, 'intelligent', 'qualified' and/or 'experienced' and usually both. These attributes were felt to be dependent on employers' personal preferences and again were not seen as a guarantee of employment 'because if they could get someone to do it they would just employ them'.

- *State exhortations*. Some interviewees who were not participating had stronger reactions to the broader implications of this statement. They suggested that it was a way of making out that some people were not 'employable' when they felt that everyone is or can be: 'I mean some people are not employable are they, but if they are motivated enough they can be'.

This interviewee discussed this issue at length, emphasising the potential impact of such exhortatory statements in de-motivating people to find work.

> [Employability] *means whether you're right for them. I think that's a bit cheeky actually. Because everyone should be given a chance equally but I just think that's cheeky. Employability is a horrible word … So what they're trying to say is get some qualifications and get yourself employed or else you won't get a job and it doesn't sound nice at all. That's pressure is that which brings me back to when I was at school, which I didn't like. I wouldn't like someone to say to me 'I'm going to see if you're employable' because I think that's horrible. I'd say well stuff your job. They want someone honest, reliable, probably personality as well. They don't want someone who's grumpy. It depends what the job is. If you're on your own it doesn't really matter you can just get on with it but if you've got other people to deal with it's like my boss used to say if you're going to shout and scream go into that little room ...* (I71; Age 31–40, Female, No benefits)

The subjective nature of employers' decisions in appointing staff was discussed at length in the interviews, especially in relation to the real worth of qualifications over experience, and was further confused by the possibility of training.

> *And do you think qualifications are important?*
>
> *Yeah and no. A lot of people get things and they haven't got no qualifications. You can go for a job and they give you the qualifications, they help you to get on and whereas other jobs you need them before you get there. So I don't know really.* (I33; Age 31-40, Female, Income Support)

It is clear that these interviewees feel that the process of recruitment is somewhat arbitrary and that nothing acts as a guarantee for work. It is important to note here that these interviewees had had several jobs and often moved in and out of employment with relative ease, albeit within a restricted range of low skilled, low paid positions, which were occasionally 'cash in hand'. These interviewees described accessing alternative routes into work. These alternative possibilities appeared to fuel some interviewees' mistrust of the education and qualifications pathway.

Alternative routes
Whilst several interviewees described working on the side at different times in their lives, none of them suggested that they consistently made a living from alternative work activities. Most common was the listing of a series of cleaning or shop jobs, some of which were not on the books, and reference to the occasional bout of security work, seasonal farm work or taxi driving. This woman is describing her jobs since leaving school at 16 in 1982.

> *… and I worked there on a night. That was, well it wasn't cash in hand, it went into the bank. Other cleaning was cash in hand, and chippy were like cash in hand.* (I33; Age 31–40, Female, Income Support)

It was sometimes difficult to follow up references to current informal economic activity with detailed prompts, without putting interviewees on edge as to how truly anonymous the interviews were going to be. Our data do suggest that the availability of alternative routes into work, which at times include the possibility of working off the record,

is linked with the possibility of gaining work without qualifications.

The sorts of jobs that these interviewees held were occasionally advertised in papers and job centres but often they had been found through friends and family. This was most frequently the means of finding work for those who went into employment straight from, or even before leaving school, both in the past and now.

> *And what about the tailoring job. How did you get into that, was that advertised?*
>
> *My mam used to be in tailoring.* (I34)
>
> *So she had left and I went into it. That was just learning tailoring. I wasn't like a machinist or owt like that.* (I34; Age 41–50, Female, Income Support)

The experiences of getting into work through family and friends and without qualifications supported these interviewees' doubts about the route through education into work. However, many interviewees who had similar experiences used the types of jobs they felt restricted to applying for as the argument for engaging in education and moving out of the low skill, low pay jobs that they didn't enjoy. In some ways they turned the pathway round and found the route they took was through work into education as described above in the section on enjoyment.

Discrimination
Many of the interviewees, especially those with criminal records, women with children and those over a certain age, felt at a disadvantage in applying to enter the labour market. Discriminatory practices by employers in terms of race, age, disability and gender were all

mentioned in the interviews. This woman's expectations of discrimination were not borne out by her experience, but this was not true for the majority of those who discussed their own experiences of discrimination.

It was Littlewoods and I thought no they are not going to give me a job I am not going to go. And somebody said to me 'you might get it, you don't know unless you try'. So I got home and the next morning I got dressed and went for this interview. I mean I tried to sound as positive as I could [laughs]. *I mean I thought they won't give it to me, me being a black lady and they wouldn't give it to me. And my qualifications, I mean I passed some of my exams. I didn't get good grades but I got Es and things. I thought they won't give me a job and I was surprised. I got a letter through the post and thought my god they have given me the job. I thought no way. It was amazing.* (I46; Age 21–30, Female, Working part time)

This interviewee's reluctance to turn up for the interview is not uncommon when experiences of application and interview have not been positive in the past.

You get motivated to go for a job ... and they can say 'I am not having you' – before the new money act came in for working. I am saying they used to go 'can't have you'. You are 45 – you are too old – I'm having a young person. (W3)

That's right. (W1)

They don't say it to your face but they are thinking this cos they are saying you are 45 and I would have to pay you like £4.50 now where I can get away with £2.25 for a 18 year old. Do you know what I am saying? And what's the point as well?

Why go for education? ... it's pointless going for an education but they go for education and try and get a good job and I can't get one because I am too old. (W3; Age 41–50, Female, Income Support, Focus Group 4)

This woman's experiences of applying for jobs have led her to feel that the pathway from education to work is at times blocked by employers' preferences for certain types of applicants which she feels may be dictated by broader financial considerations. Others also expressed this feeling, especially in relation to increasing age. Other studies suggest that it is becoming more common for those over 50 to remove themselves from the labour market in self-retirement rather than continue to search for jobs they feel they are unlikely to get.

Certainly for the interviewees over 60 the notion of education for work and a successful future was seen as irrelevant to them.

What about in the brochures here – saying 'get yourself a successful future'. What would that make you think?

I would say sod it I am going to [the Learning Centre] *to enjoy myself.* (P5)

So a successful future wouldn't be something that …

Well it is a bit late in life for me to look for a future. I am 65 so it is a bit late looking for a future. (P5; Age 60+, Male, Retired)

Despite their feelings of doubt over the link between education and work opportunities, only a few of the interviewees felt that they were unlikely to engage in education or training ever, or ever again. They did, however describe different reasons for accessing education

facilities than to find work, including enjoyment, something to do and to make friends.

In summary, interviewees' experiences of the path from education to work opportunities suggests that they have concerns over the value and recognition of qualifications, the restricted range of work opportunities available to them, and what they felt to be the discriminatory and arbitrary practices of employers. The interviewees who felt themselves to be most restricted, in terms of opportunities, were the 16–19 year olds without qualifications, ex-offenders with no qualifications, mothers with children and those who were retired.

It wasn't only these interviewees who expressed doubts about the route from education to work, but it was these interviewees who were more likely to feel alienated from the provision of education, to the extent that they felt they were unlikely to use the facilities advertised. This did not mean, however, that these interviewees weren't accessing other centres with some form of education provision. Sometimes those accessing other centres had taken a long time to make that move and this was attributed to doubts about themselves rather than doubts about the link between education and work.

Educational self-concept

We have chosen the phrase 'educational self-concept' to describe the way that interviewees refer to themselves, often using terms like 'brainy' or 'thickie' in terms of their beliefs about themselves educationally. The sense of educational failure and struggle that many of the interviewees discussed suggests that their perceptions of themselves educationally do not

encourage them to enter education and training courses that may only serve to reinforce their negative self-concepts.

Interviewees' doubts about themselves educationally caused some of them to respond negatively to the notion of getting a successful future through education provision at the Learning Centre. The doubts expressed by these interviewees were in relation to three particular areas:

- previous education experiences
- confidence
- support.

Previous education experiences

It was clear from the interviewees, who were 16–19, had no qualifications and had not attended for at least the final year, that experiences at school have a lasting effect on educational self-concept. This interviewee has been homeless, has not yet officially left school, but hasn't attended for a year.

> *Well I haven't left school officially yet but the past year I haven't been to school because I've had problems at home and all that. The last school I was at I got the help that I needed but now I'm at another school I can't be bothered, none of the teachers help me or anything like that.* (I57)

Even though people weren't asked about their levels of literacy and numeracy, at least 15 of the 87 interviewees talked about struggling with reading and writing to some degree and half of these were in the 16–19 age range. Their experiences at school meant that the interviewees in this age range were very much at the mercy of the narrow choices they felt they were able to make given their situations.

The options open to this age group (16–18)

are restricted to work or education, with restricted benefit availability for those who are unable to live in the family home. In these circumstances it seems that many non-attenders who have recently left school without qualifications would rather work or exist with or without benefits than go back into education, which they associate strongly with their school experiences.

> *Have you ever been up to the Learning Centre?*
>
> *Yeah. I was thinking about going in for one of them but I don't really want to go back into like the classroom thing.* (I67; Age 16–19, Female, Income Support)

It was not only those who had only just left school who associated adult and further education with school experiences. There were many interviewees who were over 19 who also talked about having problems with work and education in terms of their educational self-concept and their education history.

This was somewhat supported by the notions that those who were participating in education had that others thought of them as in some way remedial. This was a real cause for concern amongst those who weren't attending the Learning Centre as expressed by this man who is talking about the name of the Centre.

> *Well that makes people think you are a dimwit. You have got to come back to school to learn exactly what you should have got when you were a 16 year old.* (M3; Age 31–40, Male, Job Placement Programme, Focus Group 6)

Those who were already attending courses at the Learning Centre were extremely positive about how they were being supported in improving their confidence, but this was often identified as a problem in interviewees' previous experiences of other mainstream Further Education colleges. This was specifically related to having to learn in the same classes as school leavers, by several interviewees.

> *I was the only mature student in a group of about 12 kids and I've got problems and I know I've got problems in education but my physical work and my practical work are fine.* (M1; Age 21–30, Male, Incapacity Benefit)

The older interviewees who had previous experiences of Further Education did not all doubt the provision at the Learning Centre and were in fact very positive about the ways in which the Learning Centre overturned many of their negative expectations of adult education.

The interviewees who expressed doubts in their education self-concepts and were disinclined to access the Learning Centre were those who had never accessed education before and those who were currently accessing smaller centres. The interviewees who were already accessing smaller centres related some of their doubts about the Learning Centre directly to issues of confidence and support.

Confidence

Confidence was an issue for the majority of the interviewees. When asked to respond to a statement in the White Paper *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999b) that 'learning helps to encourage independence', most of the interviewees linked this with confidence. A substantial number of these also placed confidence first, as a point on the way to independence. This was not just related to education but also to jobs. This

woman described how she was trying to develop her education to help her to find work in the future when her children are older.

I mean I like to get to do the college courses to get the information under my belt and if I do want to go out to work then I have got it there. I mean I think because I had so many bad experiences trying to get a job. At that time it was kind of well I am not worthy to get a job anyway because I am thick. I know better now and I started with the wrong jobs basically. But at that time when you have come out of school and your confidence isn't brilliant anyway and you get all this rubbish thrown at you, well it gives you, well I think you think I will just have to be a mum and nothing else. (I44; Age 31–40, Female, Income Support)

The majority of the interviewees who were accessing other smaller centres were women with children. The influences of children and family commitments will be addressed later in the report. Here it is important to note that confidence was a major issue for women who had had children and felt that they had become isolated or lacked the skills to participate in education, training or the workplace. This woman was attending the Family Unit and was extremely positive about her experiences there.

I am doing this course but I didn't do a lot when I were at school. Do you know what I mean? And it is like learning you all over again. So I like it. It is learning me how to like go up and talk to people and not be frightened to talk to them and stuff like that. Before I wouldn't do that, I wouldn't go up to somebody and talk to them, do you know what I mean, I would wait till they come to me and talk to me but now I am all right. (I70)

So your confidence has increased a lot.

Yeah a hell of a lot yeah. (I70; Age 21–30, Female, One Parent Benefit)

When the interviewer asked this woman about her response to the Learning Centre's suggestion to go there to get a successful future she dismissed it as a 'gimmick' and said she wouldn't be interested in attending. Similar responses were given by most of the women who were accessing other centres. These responses appeared to be related to their sense of loyalty towards the centre where they had developed their confidence and this was specifically related to the support available.

Support

The women who were attending other smaller centres had been contacted by word of mouth and felt that personal contact and support were key to their attendance, precisely because they made them feel that someone thought they could achieve and was there to help them do so. This woman is responding to the question about what she would think about the suggestion to go to the Learning Centre to get a successful future.

I'd think a load of rubbish. (I71)

Really, why?

It doesn't appeal to me … because L came and said you'd be good on this course and I thought 'me'? And it pointed me out rather than this is for everyone. Do you know what I mean, but that's what they need … That's what made me go. (I71; Age 31–40, Female, Income Support)

Once these women start attending at a centre they may develop social and support networks that are inextricably bound up with their educational experience. For some of these

women these networks involve reciprocal support from the other people there and guidance and support from the staff. This woman is explaining why she left a course at the Learning Centre.

And it was difficult anyway because everybody else knew each other and I didn't. I was the only one in the room that didn't. (I39; Age 31–40, Female, Working Family Tax Credit)

She goes on to describe her current concerns about a course in counselling and how staff at the Children's Centre have offered to support her.

And I was really worried. I said it is OK doing the sort of things where it is practical but I am really worried about the written work. What if I don't keep up and what if it all goes to pot because of that? And what he actually said to me is well don't worry about it because I will help you through it. If you need it and if you come up here and you have got an essay or you have got this or that and you are not sure, he said, I will go through it with you, I will help you. (I39)

This sort of support, both peer and staff, can lead to expressions of loyalty, not just to the other people and the networks that they inhabit but also to the centre itself.

When faced with the promotion of alternative provision (at the Learning Centre) these women become defensive of their own activities and distrustful of what's on offer elsewhere.

These feelings often translated into comments about the logistics of attendance, the availability of refreshments, the size and atmosphere of the larger centre and their own or friends' problems with the crèche. All of these

may be legitimate concerns but they would not appear to be stopping other people from accessing the Learning Centre. These women simply appear to have somewhere else that they are currently happier to access. They emphasise the constant availability of supportive staff and the friendliness of the atmosphere at their own centre and criticise the lack of these elsewhere.

You can have a successful future but it doesn't have to be at [the Learning Centre]. *I don't want to go down there all the time. You probably think I'm critical but to me you have got to be prepared to go* [there]. *If you want to go into* [the Learning Centre] *and work and work and not communicate and not socialise then that is for you. But if you want to walk into a building and get that qualification but you want that support and you want that communication then* [the Children's Centre] *is for you.* (I44; Age 31—40, Female, Income Support)

These interviewees also related participating elsewhere with having to stop participating at their current centre. This was seen as problematic, not just in terms of losing friends and loosening networks but also in relation to the need to keep the centre going through continued attendance.

And have you thought about doing any courses there?

No because we would rather come here and do it. We have got to keep this centre going so – because classes here are important. (I34; Age 41–50, Female, Income Support)

The Community Centre mentioned in the above quotation has a long history and is used by several people who share family and social

ties. Some of the younger interviewees at this centre had been going there since they were small children and any perceived threat to its resources appeared to be taken quite personally. The sense of belonging in this centre reflected the geographically bounded communities that people felt they inhabited. The communities these interviewees described were made up of people in a small number of streets in a relatively small area; they did not cross major roads or traverse areas of open space. Although people had moved around the estate they tended to move within these street by street boundaries or to move further afield but travel back to the community centre in the streets where their major networks were based.

In summary then, the issue of educational self-concept is extremely important for those who have had negative experiences at school. In particular it can inhibit educational participation, especially when people have problems with literacy. Being persuaded by word of mouth is identified as the most effective way of encouraging those who lack confidence to access education facilities; once people get through the doors of education provision they seem to be prepared to participate throughout their lives. One of the most striking things about the interviews was the sheer amount of time people had spent doing education or training of some sort or another, and the number of different courses and qualifications they had pursued throughout their lives. Five people turned up at interviews with copies of their certificates. Some of these were framed and had been taken from the wall at home to show the interviewer.

This does not mean though that once people have started to access education facilities they follow one path towards a long-term goal. Interviewees described how they had done several different and often unrelated courses leading up to the point at which they were interviewed. They suggested that there were various reasons for choosing to do courses at different times in their lives; this often meant that their education history was varied and patchy.

Where interviewees' educational self-concepts were damaged or negative in some way other factors were also mentioned, including social, family and support networks, as both helping and hindering their participation in educational facilities. For example, those who were accessing smaller centres at the time of the interview found it difficult to contemplate moving into other, often larger provision that they felt may not be as supportive as the centre they were already attending.

Provision doesn't fit personal goals

The type of provision on offer caused some interviewees to doubt its suitability for them. Interviewees identified these doubts in relation to three particular areas:

- What is on offer.
- Who is organising it.
- How it is organised and taught.

What is on offer

A few interviewees questioned the appropriateness of the courses on offer for their idea of a successful future.

A successful future is something that you want to do. I don't want to do computers. I don't want to do hairdressing. I don't want to do childcare, I have got my own two … I know enough English

and Maths to get through life. (Age 21–30, Female, Income Support)

Whilst there is quite a wide variety of courses on offer at the Learning Centre, many of the interview responses did tend to assume that education meant learning about computers and this was true of participants and non-participants alike. In the interviews there was much apparent confusion about what courses and qualifications interviewees were doing and were available to them. They also appeared to have very little idea about what were appropriate courses and qualifications for them to pursue, both now and in the future.

The 16–19 year olds had least idea about what they were doing and why, and even though they are accessing education facilities they expressed doubts about their suitability.

So why there, why did you choose that one, was it because it was catering?

I didn't go up for catering at first, I went up for sports and leisure but they said the Sports and Leisure course was finished and doesn't start until January. They said there was a Catering course so I took up that. And I was doing a few days like doing Maths and stuff and then they just put me on the Catering course. (I52)

And what about the Maths and English was it English as well that you were doing?

I didn't do English I did Maths about four times and I didn't like it, it's shit. (I52; Age 16–18, Male, Not claiming)

This may not reflect a lack of available guidance, advice or information. It certainly seems to suggest, however, that it is difficult for those who are not familiar or at ease with

education to make any real sense of the options that are available to them or even the ones they end up doing.

Who is organising it

Many interviewees identified the state benefit and guidance system as not necessarily helping them into studying for the right qualifications. The experiences of doing education and training courses in these circumstances were often linked to the benefit or working situation that gave rise to the education or training opportunity. In the following interview a man talks about his experience of education through New Deal in response to the statement 'learning helps to bring qualifications up to date'.

… it has to be the right sort of qualifications because with New Deal they push you into loads of weird qualifications that don't mean anything. Because I went to do my electronics – that was on New Deal. They said I had to do an NVQ in electronics, which isn't worth anything, so I went to college and I tried to do it myself, working at the same time. And the tutor said we could do it like this, and he got me onto the New Deal but I was totally misinformed and I had to sign off. I had to change my benefits, so in that way it's a bit iffy but if they give the right qualifications then yeah … They always try to push you into something else for some reason. Why, I don't know. (I58; Age 21–30, Male, Incapacity Benefit, Part time at Learning Centre)

There was an abiding suspicion of benefit-related education in those over 20 and this was also true for this age group in relation to training schemes. The concern of the interviewee above was to be on the right course in order for him to progress appropriately to

gain work. The interviewee below describes how the experience of being given training that does not lead to employment is not only de-motivating but also detrimental to the trainee in the immediate circumstances of having to find other work. The major concern of those who had done schemes was the real possibility of finding work afterwards. The interviewee below was not unusual in that many of the interviewees had started training funded by an employer only to have the training stopped or the firm close down.

So when I were working I was doing the course and they said oh there is going to be a job at the end of it. And come the end of the time there wasn't a job so it was pointless me doing it basically. (I11)

So how did that make you feel?

I was a bit gutted because I had spent six months doing nowt, sort of like learning. And every time I have applied for another job in radiography I haven't had enough experience. (I11; Age 21–30, Male, Not claiming)

These interviewees made a clear distinction between the enforcement of education and the choice to learn, associating enforcement with school and many benefit related options and the choice to learn with self-motivated attendance at community centres, the Learning Centre, Further Education colleges, the Children's Centre and universities.

I did an NVQ 1 and 2 Catering. I did that at [a local Further Education college]. (I39)

And why did you do that?

Because I had to. I was forced into it ... I found

out the only way I could actually get any benefit was by signing on as available for work … And basically I was forced to go on a course or lose my benefit at the end because I had been doing it a while and they said you go on a course or you lose your benefit it is as simple as that. So I actually ended up doing that course because I had to, but I didn't enjoy one minute of it. I hated every minute of it but it was a need that I had to do it. (I39; Age 31–40, Female, Working Families Tax Credit)

It is clear from these references to the experience of doing schemes and benefit-related qualifications that interviewees use their past experiences of education or training to make sense of their current opportunities. This can mean that they feel that what is realistically available to them in terms of education and training, may be very different from what policy makers, education providers and benefit advisors suggest is available to them.

How it is taught

Another element of provision fitting personal goals is how courses made interviewees feel in the learning environment. This is linked with educational self-concept and education history as discussed above, but also merits mention here as it can contribute to the decision to take up or continue a course or not.

Throughout all the interviews negative images of school are common. These included the rejection of:

- desk-bound passivity associated with being told what to do

- regulated and pressurised learning and teaching associated with examinations and achievement levels

- deficit educational self-concepts related to failing and being a 'failure'

- last chance notions of school education achievement where to fail at school is to fail forever.

Whilst 'school' and 'education' are acknowledged as important, they are linked in some of the interviewees' minds with failure, intimidation, boredom and despair and they specifically do not want any adult education experience to replicate this. When asked what they think of when they hear the word 'education' this focus group went on to discuss the things they associated with school.

Desks. Sitting at a desk with paper. (W1)

And then what?

Just listening … just listening. You know … (W1)

Being told what to do. (W2)

Yeah. (W1)

Being told what to do. Is that the sort of impression that you have of education?

Yes. (M1)

Does the idea of education like that seem attractive?

Well the idea of going back to school is a problem that I don't think many of us have, except the fact that we find it's all bloody boring now. We will be falling asleep ... because we've done it, we have been there and we have got the T-shirt. We need something different else we are going to sit there and we are going to start yawning. (M3; Focus Group 6; W=woman, M=man)

This woman is talking about how she thinks courses should be run so that they are not like school. Her ideas are linked with the support that she feels is necessary at the beginning of courses in an induction type period to make students relaxed with staff and peers.

… I mean I know it is supposed to be a college but when you are an adult you don't want to feel like you are going back to school. (I44)

So what is that school environment like? What are the problems with it?

I don't like it. To me it is too clinical. I think if you start a course there I think you should have two or three weeks to get to know one another, to build up a rapport with people, to know what level they are at and what level you are at. And then start your college course and get down to it. Because at the end of the day you are gonna need support. I mean I am dyslexic so I like to know who is going to take the crap out of me, and who isn't and who you can have a laugh with and relax. Because you don't want to go in and sit there thinking well I daren't say I can't do this because I feel a bit of a twit. (I44; Age 31–40, Female, Incapacity Benefit)

Those who doubted the relationship between the education provision available and their own goals linked this with the courses available, what they felt in taking courses and potential realistic work opportunities. Where they perceived a gap they were likely to feel some resistance towards the education provision presented. It is no surprise that where they perceived courses to be unavailable or that the courses available were inappropriate for them it was unlikely that interviewees would pursue accessing that particular facility.

Living conditions

The paths that people are required to travel along in order to achieve what is defined as success are difficult for many people. A wide range of factors may play a part in affecting the ability of people to deal with work, education and training in a fashion which is considered as 'normal', or, at least, in the case of policy, is considered as typical.

The community that was the focus of our study confronts its members with a range of risks that may reduce their capacity successfully to negotiate or even perceive their paths to 'success' in the worlds of work, education and training. The extent of the risks they face is a feature of the social structure. The explanation of why particular individuals become victims of these risks would involve a range of psychological as well as sociological considerations. Exposure to these risks appears to be a crucial determinant of the ability that people have to find their way through the broader systems of work, education and training. Since these risks are not evenly distributed throughout society, it is apparent that they create particular difficulties for those who live in communities like the one under consideration here.

Social and support networks

The interviewees talked about the particular difficulties of the circumstances in which they lived and their effect on their doubts about education in three areas related to social and support networks:

- restricting and restricted networks
- deviance and dependence
- children and childcare.

There has been a lot of recent work done on Social Capital (Field and Spence, 1999). The most prominent form of social capital in our data is that of support capital (Stack, 1974), which helps people to cope with problems posed by their circumstances, and is often provided by their socially similar others. The other, which is less prominent, is that of leverage capital (Granovetter, 1973), which helps people to find jobs, change their life chances or take up opportunities.

Social capital is prevalent for the older interviewees and especially women with children who can rely on different networks of family and friends to provide different types of support. This support, whilst at times useful for sharing the burden of childcare and lessening isolation, can also carry with it obligations which can restrict awareness and the take up of opportunities. Support capital is less apparent for the 16–19 year olds who are living alone without family support and who have only restricted social networks available locally.

All of those interviewees in the 16–19 age range who had no qualifications did not attend for the last year at school. It was common for these interviewees and many of those in the older age ranges who had few or no qualifications, to voice their regret at not having worked harder or attended at school (see also Lloyd, 1999). Non-attendance was attributed across the board to problems at home, boredom, distractions and unpleasant classroom and social experiences. For the 16–19 year olds this meant variously being in care, being homeless, being pregnant, being picked on by staff and being bullied by other pupils.

I liked it yeah but I had a lot of problems at home and that. And some people there distracted me but when I wanted to know something I'd put my hand up and that but they were used to me being a certain way and they ignored me – like 'shut up you silly girl'. And certain teachers had it in for me and they were pushing me to be the person they wanted me to be. (Age 16–19, Female, Incapacity Benefit)

Such experiences of school have had lasting effects on these interviewees, making them disinclined to re-enter school-type institutions, certainly at this particular stage in their lives. The legacy of problems that overcome teenagers to the extent that they are withdrawn, or withdraw themselves from networks that are perceived to be damaging to them continue to affect their emotional, educational and social development.

What distinguished the younger interviewees (especially the 16 and 17 year olds) with no qualifications, from the older interviewees, were the influences which operated on their processes of decision making. All of the non-attenders interviewed were in their own accommodation and thus did not live in traditional family units. In the absence of the last year of schooling they appear to have been, and to continue to be, reliant on their social and community networks to gain information and understanding of education and the labour market and their roles in their lives. Often these were very restricted social networks of friends of similar ages and circumstances.

Several of the 16–17 year olds expressed doubts as to how independent they were despite living alone in single tenancy accommodation in a supported independent

living unit. They were provided with fully furnished and equipped accommodation, a support worker, and educational and financial advice and guidance. These interviewees were quite clearly still dealing with many family and education problems in the past.

This is where the 16–19 year olds appear to be at a distinct disadvantage, when their networks are restricted to those who engage in deviant activity, have the same, or even more damaged educational self-concepts than themselves and when they have few mutually trusting relationships. Time and again those who lived alone in this age group distinguished between 'friend friends' and others.

I've got mates but they're not friend friends if you know what I mean. (I68)

What's a friend?

Someone who you can rely on, who doesn't lie, who won't stab you in the back. (I68)

And the other ones, the ones that aren't?

Ones that are people who just do what they do and not care. (I68; Age 16–19, Female, Incapacity Benefit)

These interviewees' distrust of others did not encourage them to enter education facilities that they were already suspicious of because of their association with school.

Several of these interviewees described making moves into work and education as group activities shared with those they engaged in deviant behaviour with. For example, this interviewee had been sacked from an apprenticeship with a large employer for failing the drug test. At the time of the interview he had just found out that he'd been accepted onto

the Environmental Task Force where his friends were already employed.

> *Cos it is all to do with your listening and sounds and eyesight and all that. So we took our test and we failed the second week. It wasn't just me, it was another two lads off this estate I were knocking around with. But them two now, they are working with what I am starting. They have been doing this for the past three months now.* (Age 16–19, Male, Jobseeker's Allowance)

Some of the older interviewees also talked about moves into education as group activities and were more explicit about the mutual support that was offered by accessing facilities with friends. This man started, and has continued, to access education with an older friend.

> *Well like I say me and this guy, we did the electronics course and we did the networking together. We used to grab leaflets, we were both sort of educationally disabled. We used to go up to the place and sit in the car and talk, but never go in. But this time we went up one time, and I said we're going to have to go in, so we went in, sat down and felt silly. Like I say we stuck at it for a couple of months, like I say it was '95 and we didn't go back until '97. That was the actual thing that made it possible for me to access education because I don't think I ever would have done it before.* (I58)

> *So it sounds like the mate was really important in helping you get up there?*

> *Yeah, definitely. Yeah, I mean it does sound daft but it was actually. Because we both had bad experiences at school and we just expected adult learning to be very similar to school.* (I58; Age 21–30, Male, Incapacity Benefit)

It can be seen here that certain networks can help to facilitate educational activity precisely because of the potential for overcoming self-doubt and paving over past experience, with support. Those who were already at the Learning Centre felt that they were offered support and the potential to develop new networks. This was greatly appreciated by those who felt they needed it.

> *What about, do any of your mates do things like coming here?*

> *Well I haven't got any mates but I just know people but quite a lot of the people I know come here, I've met quite a few people just by coming here.* (I20; Age 21–30, Male, Income Support)

However, for those who had restricted networks the opportunities to make group moves was less apparent, especially when their existing networks did not encourage them, and at times actively discouraged them from doing so.

Restricting and restricted networks

The requirement to adhere to certain 'norms' of behaviour in families became very apparent in the process of door knocking around the research site. Two women in the 16–19 age range who were contacted in this way were unable to be involved in interviewing because of their partners' insistence that they did not talk to the interviewer, or go out during the day. The link workers, who were employed at the Children's Centre, described this as a real problem for several women on the estate.

> *… and another reason about some groups that they've* [the other link workers] *had twice last week. It was one that you came to with me …*

her partner influences her lifestyle and that's happened a few times – won't have them going out, not on their own, and in fact that is quite common – now I think about it. Over the year I've probably had six families so that's quite a lot ... (l26)

Six women being restricted by a male partner?

In that situation yeah. One I did manage to get up but he came as well and he was very – he controlled her up there anyway, you know – one of the nursery workers gave the lad some juice and he said 'tell her he doesn't want it, we've brought us own'. So he'd influence over her in that again, although they did come up but they didn't come again. And some of em – like the girl you met she'll say it – 'you know what he's like, he doesn't like me going out so I don't get dressed all day'. (l26; Age 31–40, Female, Working part time)

Whilst the restriction was applied by the male partner, in this particular example it was the male partner's family who lived nearby and observed that these restrictions were adhered to. Giving up these networks appeared hard for those who had lived in the area for most or all of their lives. Leaving did not appear to be an option for those who had family ties in the local area except temporarily for working away, for example with the army, and only for men. The possibility of leaving appeared to be even less of an option for women, across all the age ranges, who relied on local friend and family networks for support with children and for social activity outside the home.

I mean it is not just a place where anybody just wants to go. It's a case of I have got family round here. (l16; Age 21–30, Female, Income Support)

Women and school leavers appeared to be most influenced by restricted networks, both in the options they felt were open to them and the decisions they made to take up work or education or not. It wasn't only their personal networks that they referred to, however, but also their perceptions of the local community and the broader networks in which they lived.

Many of the interviewees, as well as those spoken to on the street and whilst door-knocking, expressed the desire to keep themselves to themselves. This also appeared to be for reasons to do with self-concept and was expressed in terms of: personal and private space; fear; and dissociation.

Personal and private space

These interviewees expressed a desire to be left alone so that they could have space to think and be as they wished to be, without interference from others. This desire was identified as stopping people from getting involved in education and training because they didn't want people to know their private business.

I don't know anybody. I keep myself to myself. I don't even know the next door neighbour yet. (l11)

Why is that important?

I don't know. I don't know. It gives me chance to think and stuff like that, thinking silly thoughts. I don't know why. Some of them have got nice jobs now my mates and I am still looking for the right one. (l11)

Fear

There were many references to the fear of property crime, which kept people at home and away from broader networks of acquaintances

and out of education facilities that require regular attendance forming patterns of absence from home.

> *You can't go out of your door without, you are walking out of your front door and they are coming through your back door round here … I daren't leave my house. If I go to the shop or owt like that I have always got somebody in the house looking after the house. I daren't leave it … If he is not here cos he like goes to work and that lot it is awful because like when he is at work and if like I go out I am frightened to death.* (I55)

Dissociation

Some interviewees didn't feel that they belonged in the area or with the people in the area. Some even described how they denied that they lived there, refused to engage in education in the area, and took their children out of the area to do extra-curricular activities because they didn't want to be associated with it.

> *I don't really bother. I don't really associate with people as they are not my type round here. I more or less keep myself to myself and then I don't get any trouble.* (I16)

Trouble and crime were frequently mentioned as common occurrences in the local area. Whilst those who talked about keeping themselves to themselves tried to avoid contact with deviant and anti-social behaviour there were interviewees who were embroiled in just this sort of activity.

Deviance and dependence

Interviewees in the 16–19 age range relied heavily on the social aspects of the supported living unit and / or the community centres they attended. This is where these interviewees

develop their social networks. The people they meet through these centres offer both information exchange, on the local labour market and on local education opportunities, as well as more deviant and risky reciprocal activity.

> *Yeah it's helping because I've got mates from when I was younger and it's helped me to get mates. It's helped me to get money from the cars and that and other things like helping – if you go into that school over there you go in there they tell you how to get jobs and where to get jobs from.* (I52; Age 16–19, Male, Unemployed, Not claiming)

Several interviewees described criminal activities and drug and alcohol dependency as related to their doubts about their potential success in and through education. They appeared to have two major concerns depending on the nature of their deviance: earnings and commitment.

Earnings

Those who stole cars, property and money were mainly concerned to earn money to allow them to stop thieving.

> *Well at the end of the day if I did get a job, a decent paid job like I do want, I wouldn't have to go pinching for my money.* (Age 16–19, Male, Jobseeker's Allowance)

Two of the interviewees also stated that they had been keen to get jobs because it would look better in court. These interviewees' primary concern was to find work and not to get involved in education, both in order to earn a legitimate income and to allow them to afford some of the property they were currently taking

without consent. This 16–19 year old is talking about how he feels he might become independent.

> *I'd become independent because I haven't got any money and I need money … to get me car and stuff because I'm 17. If I get a licence, that would stop me stealing cars because I'll be driving around and stuff, I'll have something to do.* (I52; Age 16–19, Male, Unemployed, Not claiming)

How realistic these interviewees' perceptions of the potential work opportunities are is questionable. The claims made by interviewees for the role of work in offering them alternative lifestyles certainly suggest that clear guidance and advice in relation to education and the labour market are key.

Commitment

Those who drank and took drugs were unsure of their capacity to commit to a course that would require attendance, concentration and out of hours studying. This man is describing his first experience of re-entering and dropping out of education.

> *The first thing I ever did was go into a drop in centre, a community centre. It took me like years to get up the courage to actually go. I started off doing Maths and English there. I stuck that probably for about two months and then I didn't do it any more.* (I58)

> *Why not?*

> *I was just getting into the school thing again, I didn't fit in. I was doing a lot of drugs, drinking and it wasn't really the right time.* (I58; Age 21–30, Male, Incapacity Benefit)

This man's personal circumstances and lifestyle are identified here as having a direct effect on the choices he made at that particular stage in his life. Other interviewees also voiced their concerns over their capacity to commit, concentrate and study. This man is responding to a question about sticking to a new key skills course he is starting as part of the Environmental Task Force.

> *Because it is hard. I will admit myself it is hard doing it. But otherwise I am glad I am doing it cos while I am in here it is keeping me out of trouble.* (P1)

> *What's the hardest thing – what do you think is the biggest problem?*

> *Drugs and alcohol.* (P1)

> *Because you want to do them?*

> *Yeah because I want to do them. No one is telling me I have got to do them I have done it all my life. Well not all my life but I have done it since I were 12/13. I stopped when I was 14 when I was put in prison. I don't know – I mean I was about 15 and just restarted it again.* (P1; Age 16–19, Male, Jobseeker's Allowance)

Whilst this man identifies his dependency on drink and drugs as a personal responsibility it is apparent that for those whose personal networks encourage this activity, giving up is not just a question of stopping smoking weed and drinking but of changing their entire lifestyle. For example, the interviewee above shows awareness of the problem he has with drinking:

> *It's the beer what does it to me. Once I have had a beer there is no controlling. It is like, most of*

*the time when I get arrested it is always when I
am drunk. It does make you do stupid things.* (P1)

But when asked earlier in the interview what
he does when he isn't at the community centre
he replies:

*Drink. I go to the pub. With my dad and his mates
and that cos I knock around with them.* (P1)

And what do they do?

They are hooligans really. (P1; Age 16–19, Male,
Jobseeker's Allowance)

These interviewees described their attempts
to resist exactly the sort of alternative behaviour
that is blamed for keeping people out of work
and education facilities. Whilst these
interviewees place responsibility on themselves
for their activities it is clear that the expectations
placed on them by their personal social and
family networks can militate against their own
attempts to enter mainstream, legitimate
activity.

Whilst it is difficult for these interviewees to
move away from their networks, one agent of
change that is key for these interviewees is the
availability of respected, realistic guidance that
both facilitates entry into, and supports
continuing engagement with, education and/or
the labour market. Youth workers were
mentioned by some of these interviewees as
having important roles in their lives both as
advice givers and as providers of support.

Unfortunately we can only imagine what
happens to those engaged in deviant or
dependent activity who do not have contact
with brokers of information outside their
restricted networks. This is one group of people
who are inevitably missing from these data,

precisely because they were not visible to the
research process that relied on making contact
via workers in the area.

Children
Whilst the community, and the social networks
within it, are part of the social structure within
which people find themselves, their own
personal experiences can have a major impact
on how they are able to work their way through
the worlds of work, education and training.

For the women with families the most
important factor in the equation is their
children. Childcare is often stated as a barrier to
participation in education and training. The
response of the education provider wanting to
tackle this issue is the provision of crèche
facilities. In this study childcare was a much
more complex problem than not having a crèche
available. Having children involves many issues
that affect women's options in terms of
education, training and work. The issues of
confidence and support have been discussed
already and are also pertinent to the
circumstances in which mothers find it difficult
to access facilities. The other issues dealt with
here are those of time pressure and childcare.

Time pressure
Parents with children, especially more than one
child, have very little free time that isn't taken
up with the organisation of washing, cleaning,
shopping and food preparation as well as health
visits and checks. These pressures are increased
when there is no supportive partner to share the
work. (Whilst there are figures available for
single parents, there are no figures which
accurately represent the number of parents who
take on all or most of the responsibility for
childcare.)

That's another reason, another reason is genuinely not having any time because I found I was doing my courses in the toddler groups and everything and looking after my third son which because of the age difference had made it sort of impossible. Well it didn't it's just there was no time, all of a sudden there was no time. Because I'd take the eldest to school in the morning, and then my second went to nursery on an afternoon, so it's taking all your day up and you still have to like go shopping or whatever or tidy. So I genuinely felt that I didn't have time because my day was broken up so much with dropping children off and picking them up and also looking after another baby as well. It depends on the age difference of your children whether they're at nursery, school, playgroup, whatever, that all affects it ... and it's so busy because you're always booking appointments for yourself and your children here there and everywhere. (I26; Age 31–40, Female, Working part time)

It was obvious from trying to make arrangements to interview women with families that whilst their weeks and days may follow patterns of school attendance these were regularly disrupted by other demands for which they had to be flexible. Some of these unpredictable demands involved children and household related activities whilst others were to do with providing support or being available for partners, other family members or friends.

Childcare
It was most common for the women with children to express their lives and their futures as child-centred. They saw themselves in relation to their children, having to fit work, education and social activities around childcare, school attendance and even more demanding, school holidays.

I would love to do it. I would like to get a job that fits in with me and my kids. I mean it's holidays that really puts you out, when they are on holiday and that, that really puts you out. (I33)

There was also some tension between the availability of childcare and the pressure to look after their children themselves. The most common theme for these women was the feeling of boredom and desperation at being stuck in the house all day.

A parent alone in the home with young children can become trapped in the house, bored and isolated, finding it increasingly difficult to socialise outside the home with adults. This situation is exacerbated when the children's health is poor or parents feel they have particular problems that are theirs alone.

And what about you? What would you be doing if you weren't here?

Probably suicidal by now. (I38)

Well I started having bad post-natal after I had him. Panic attacks, anxiety and post-natal. Sort of the reason I came out of the house – well it is not my sort of thing really – polite chitchat, talking about the price of things. But out of desperation I came up. (I38)

So support. Was that important?

Er it is once you have done it and you are comfy with it. I mean the first time is horrible because – but then again nobody sort of like gathers around in a little group. It is not like a clique. Once you are there it is nice because people know what it is like. I have actually met people that have had panic attacks rather than just reading about them. It's stuff like that that helps the most. (I38)

Whilst relatives are at times available they are not always consistently available to provide regular, patterned support to fit in with work or education commitments. There is also evidence that some women are under pressure from relatives to use them for childcare although this may inhibit the use of alternative childcare arrangements that are more suited to the demands of work or education.

Children were at times described as prompting educational activity amongst participants at the learning centre but amongst non-participants and those who were accessing smaller centres they were described as imposing restraints on the amount of energy and time mothers could devote to education and training. Childcare was an issue but not just in terms of crèche availability. Mothers were under tremendous pressure both in terms of time and

in terms of other support activities that made participation in education impossible at certain times in their children's lives. The knock-on effects of having and looking after children, those of isolation and a reduction in confidence mean that re-entry into education, even when it is physically possible, is a difficult step to take without continued support and guidance.

It is clear from our data that there are many interrelated and contradictory experiences that are at play in people's lives when they make decisions about participating in education and training. These personal, social and financial issues affect perceptions of opportunities as well as the capacity to engage with them. We would now like to draw together our conclusions, locate our data in the broader context of the current policy model, and discuss the implications of our study for future policy.

6 Conclusions

Our study has attempted to better explain participation and non-participation in education and training through an exploration of people's notions of 'successful futures' and how these are influenced by, and influence their experiences and perceptions of the role of education, training and work in the contexts of their lives.

It is clear from our data that there are many contradictory experiences that are at play in people's lives when they make decisions about participating in education and training. These personal, social and financial issues affect individuals' perceptions of opportunities as well as their capacity to engage with them. Some features and risks of these barriers and pathways are particularly apparent in an area of social disadvantage like the research site.

In the analysis of our data we pulled together themes that are summarised here under the headings used in the report.

Educational achievement and work opportunities

Some of the interviewees were suspicious of the role of education in gaining employment. Their suspicions were associated with experiences of discriminatory and arbitrary employment practices and their experiences and expectations of doing certain types of work that do not require qualifications or involve training.

Interviewees were also sceptical about the value of certain qualifications. Those who were doing courses were often confused about what qualifications or accreditation they were working towards and what would be appropriate for them in terms of progression from their current course.

Different forms of work, voluntary and unofficial (cash in hand) did feature in some of our interviewees' lives but fulfilled very different purposes. Voluntary work was identified as being enjoyable and socially useful and in some way worthwhile, whereas unofficial work was simply a means to a financial end. Whilst voluntary work might involve training and responsibility, unofficial work was associated with informal appointment and work practices. The low paid and insecure nature of both some official and unofficial employment were identified by some interviewees as reasons to participate in education and training to improve their prospects.

Some interviewees who were in work that allowed them to move and progress specifically linked this with education and training and chose to participate in order to move both within and beyond their current workplace.

Educational self-concept and the provision being presented

The vast majority of our interviewees had both beliefs in and doubts about education and training in realising a successful future. Many had done some form of education and training since leaving school, both formally at local colleges, the Learning Centre, and the Family and Children's Centres and more informally at local community centres. There were only a small minority who had not done any education and training and who expressed no desire to do any in the future. These few were all in the 16–18 age range and identified negative experiences at school, in the classroom and in their own belief in their academic capacities, to be their major concerns.

Older interviewees also had concerns over their capacities in a learning environment. The interviewees who were already accessing small centres that focused on family and child welfare or social activities (mainly women with children) often felt positive about the confidence they had gained and the progress they had made, and were loyal to the staff and peers who were supporting them. This made them disinclined to access different, 'more formal' provision.

Personal goals and the education provision being presented

Successful futures are relative to people's current circumstances. Those who have children and those who are retired are less likely to identify themselves as having a personal successful future ahead of them, although they may have ideas about their children's futures. Whilst the 16–19 year olds might identify some aspects of work as indicating success, such as money and cars, these were often associated with stopping them from engaging in deviant activity and were possibly unrealistic in the short term. The overwhelming desire of most interviewees was to do a job they enjoyed and to have a reasonable quality of life.

Circumstantial factors (having children, work commitments, lack of support, financial hardship) and the education provision being presented

Social networks played a key role in two ways. Firstly, they helped people to find out about and access education and training and work. Secondly, they restricted activities and imposed boundaries and/or expectations of deviant and dependent behaviour. The features of the local area that affected people's choices were the criminal activity and the area's bad reputation, yet most interviewees were unlikely to move out of the area, especially the women with children who had strong support networks. Children were of particular importance both in prompting educational activity and in inhibiting it because of time-pressure and the problems of fitting education and work around childcare, particularly during school holidays.

Our study indicates many personal and contextual factors that bar or aid people in their progression through education and training. We would now like to look at the current policy framework, to explore what our data tell us about how policy impacts on people's lives.

7 Locating our data in the policy framework

The policy framework

The social policy being pursued by New Labour has two outstanding characteristics that define it and two salient mechanisms by which it operates. The two key characteristics of current social policy are:

- work is seen as the central means through which social policy will be pursued

- individuals themselves are given the main responsibility for improving their conditions of life by taking advantage of training and employment opportunities voluntarily (DfEE, 2000).

The two mechanisms through which policy operates are:

- the assumptions about how individuals, education and training providers and employers think and act

- the prescriptions about how individuals, education and training providers and employers should act.

The government's approach is largely based on the individualistic market model in which learners have to choose to undertake learning and pay for it themselves, albeit with assistance from the state. It involves a rather instrumental view of education being principally a means to occupational advancement.

Our study suggests that the current model is inherently contradictory in that the assumptions made are not always borne out by experience. People have to negotiate the education, training and employment systems according to policy prescriptions about how they should act. That is, that they should pursue work and take responsibility for engaging in education and training to that end, even though the education system may have cast them as failures and the job market may reject or marginalise them.

The links between individuals, employers, and training providers are meant to work as a coherent system. However, its smooth operation requires acceptance of a particular culture, in the sense of a set of beliefs and values, which motivate individuals and firms to focus on goal-oriented, individual, rational action in pursuit of material rewards. To the extent that people do not govern their behaviour in this way, and there is no intrinsic reason why they should, then the system may break down.

Locating our data

How the model breaks down

Broadly the system appears to break down in our study because it makes assumptions about how and why individuals incorporate education and training in their lives and about how employers appoint people that are not consistent with our interviewees' experiences as detailed below.

Motivation

In our study some people did not emphasise material rewards but instead focused on some other form of personal fulfilment, such as maximising personal interest and involvement through enjoyment, or as simply coping in order to survive. They associated these other types of motivation with their choice not to access some of the provision that was apparently open to them. Also other activities were seen as preferable, such as becoming focused on their role as parents or doing voluntary work. These

were identified as alternative routes to the fulfilment interviewees were seeking.

Individualism

Another weakness of the model is that individual motivation does not take seriously the fact that people do not calculate their own futures on their own and without reference to others. Indeed, the idea that people are free agents who can make their own decisions on these kinds of issues is misleading. In our study family relationships and the restricted networks of 16–19 year olds in particular, play a major role in influencing how and why people decide to participate in education, training and work.

Some schools of thought within social science reject the individualistic model of motivation and adopt a social model. Social models of motivation have recently been revived through a consideration of the role of networks that in part create a framework of relationships through which individuals access pathways of various kinds. In our study social networks can be seen as the source of people's perceptions and decisions both to participate and not to participate in education and training provision. Where there were decisions not to participate these could be considered to be forms of resistance or 'resistant strategies' (Scott, 1990; Quigley, 1992; McGivney, 1999b).

Employment and recruitment

Another cultural assumption is that individuals hold the belief that employers will recruit workers on the basis of formal qualifications and on the basis of a dispassionate selection between applicants. In our study many interviewees described how they did not hold this belief, citing personal experiences of arbitrary and discriminatory practices as

evidence. Some of these potential employees and participants in education did not then consider that education and training was the preferred route to employment.

Skills and qualifications

Another important assumption is that employers will believe that the training system provides trainees with the skills that they require and that the system of qualifications is an accurate measure of the possession of skills by individuals. It is also assumed that they wish to obtain the most highly qualified possible employees and that this will be the key consideration when they offer employment to an applicant. In our study interviewees believed that employers often recruited on some other basis than qualifications, namely experience or through personal networks, or using some idiosyncratic notion of personal qualities and that they did not necessarily value certain qualifications at all.

Summary

In general, the system will break down where key processes, such as motivation and occupational recruitment, do not operate in accordance with the cultural expectations on which the model is based. Underpinning all of these points are material conditions of life, personal experiences of education, training and work, and educational self-concept. These have a powerful effect on the perceptions that interviewees have of opportunities that are available to them which may not coincide with policy makers' and practitioners' perceptions of what individuals' options are.

It has been common for professionals to cite individuals' misperceptions of opportunities as the cause of non-participation (Brady *et al.*,

1991). Far from being individual characteristics, however, we would argue that these make up the historical, social and personal contexts in which people may choose to participate in education and training, or not at certain points in their lives. It is precisely these contexts that might be differently perceived by policy makers and eventually employers if the deficit model of individuals and remedial adult education could be dropped.

From the data in our study we would argue that there are two mechanisms through which social policy could be operated which responds to these conclusions. These are:

- Starting where people are currently and not from a view of individuals as being deficient in some way.

- Building on people's personal interests and concerns to develop ways forward with appropriate support and guidance,

even if these do not fit the policy assumptions.

Where participants in the Learning Centre and those who attended other centres were clearly positive about education and training, these two mechanisms, starting from the students' current position and building on their interests, were important features of their experiences and desires.

We propose a supported system of continuing education and training, building on personally relevant interests, with realistic guidance for progression in terms of education, training and work as appropriate. Our report suggests that this provision should be localised, and involve workers in the community making contact with those who are isolated or restricted in their current activities and networks. These recommendations are discussed in more detail in the following chapter on policy implications.

8 Policy implications

Our analysis suggests that the general model underlying existing policy diverges from the conceptions and experiences of a significant section of those at whom the policy is directed in terms of the way in which it understands the relationship between individual opportunity, education, training and employment.

We have approached the policy implications resulting from the research in two ways.

Firstly, our study can make a particular contribution in considering the policy implications of the research by looking at what it can tell us about how key players in the system may be viewed by members of socially excluded groups.

- So far as employers are concerned, members of these groups may frequently perceive that they will be subject to discrimination based on a possible range of factors such as age, educational record, the area they come from, and the perception of them as coming from the lowest stratum of society. Many are also sceptical about the value which employers ascribe to qualifications in the process of recruitment.

- So far as those who provide education and training are concerned, it would seem that a major issue is how to get members of socially excluded groups to take the first step into education and training. It may be that local and relatively informal educational settings, which are very close to highly localised communities, are a way into education for some of the people involved. In addition, members of these groups require very substantial degrees of

support, both financial and social, in order to succeed on the courses they take.

- So far as policy is concerned, socially excluded groups perceive a need for a clearer appreciation of the wide range of factors that make it exceptionally difficult for many of them to plan ahead. This is especially the case in terms of making a rational consideration of their educational and training needs in relation to their life goals.

Secondly, we show that communities that sustain low levels of educational participation, like the research site, have distinctive characteristics which policy could address:

- The pace of change in education and the lack of relevance of the experience of parents to that of their children is a source of difficulty in that parents are unable to give or make sense of advice given, either to them or to their children.

- In schools themselves, the increased pressure for the achievement of school-wide targets may lead to the further marginalisation of difficult children and young people and those towards the bottom of the measured ability range. This will intensify the knock-on effects of this process described in this report.

- Family life is also extremely difficult and precarious in these communities because of a range of economic and social pressures.

- The role played by the informal economy on either side of the law is also an

important factor that draws people away from the legitimate opportunity structure.

- Both community development work and youth work, when employed intensively, can help to reduce the inward orientation and defensiveness which current conditions tend to generate.

There are also a number of broader cultural issues which cut across a wide range of government policies and which are significant in influencing the overall environment in which people make decisions about their training, education and work.

- It is arguable that the emphasis on work as the principal means of dealing with poverty has serious deficiencies. In particular it forces the benefit system into a disciplinary mode of operation that many disadvantaged people experience as oppressive, and consequently resist or withdraw from.

- Related to this issue is the unresolved conflict between the emphasis on getting people into work and the apparent desire to improve the skills of the workforce. Many people experience contradictory

pressures here, and sometimes these experiences are likely to alienate them from the worlds of both education and training. Our study shows that people are wary of finding themselves under pressure to give up courses which they are enjoying because some kind of work is available, or alternatively completing a training course but with no job prospects at the end of it.

An unfortunate feature of government is the assumption it makes that everybody can be dealt with in the same fashion in terms of attempting to lever them into the labour force, education or training system. The reality of living at the margins of society in terms of income, security, status, other networks, obligations and responsibilities, may make it very difficult for people to take up what are viewed in policy terms as normal and legitimate opportunities. Perhaps more appreciation of the substantial barriers that many people face as a result of the experience of living in communities where family breakdown, poverty, crime, drugs, school exclusion and educational failure form part of the normal risks of life is needed.

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