findings

Attitudes to adult education in disadvantaged areas

There is currently much concern about widening participation in adult education and training. One local initiative has attempted to address issues of non-participation in an area of social disadvantage. This study, by Helen Bowman, Tom Burden and John Konrad, interviewed local residents to explore their perceptions of 'successful futures' and the role of education and training in their lives. The study found that:

- **For most interviewees a 'successful future' was to do a job they enjoyed and to have a reasonable quality of life, not just to gain material rewards.**

- **Some interviewees were sceptical of the role of education in helping them gain employment due to experiences of arbitrary employment practices and of jobs that do not require qualifications or involve training.**

- **Unofficial work was associated with informal appointment and work practices. Some interviewees identified the low-paid and insecure nature of such employment as reasons to participate in education and training to improve their prospects.**

- **Interviewees who were in jobs that allowed them to move and progress specifically chose to participate in education outside work in order to move both within and beyond their current workplace.**

- **Negative experiences at school and other colleges and concern about academic competence were major concerns for interviewees of all ages.**

- **Women with children who were accessing small supportive centres were not inclined to use different, 'more formal' provision.**

- **Social networks helped interviewees to find out about and access education and training and work but they also restricted activities and encouraged isolating, anti-social or dependent behaviour.**

- **The researchers conclude that experiences at school, academic confidence and perceptions of work opportunities will affect people's views of the role of education and training in their lives. Enjoyment and appropriate, supportive local guidance and provision need to be emphasised if policies are to encourage people to access and progress through education and training opportunities.**

Introduction

It is generally accepted that education can open up new opportunities and broaden horizons. Education is not an isolated experience, however, and the decisions to become involved in education and/or training as an adult are made in the context of people's past and current experiences. Previous research in the areas of adult education provision, current government policy, social exclusion, lifelong learning and social networks suggests that both social and individual factors influence whether people do or do not get involved in education and training. Some of these are particularly apparent in an area of social disadvantage like the research site in this study.

The aims of this study were to explore people's notions of 'successful futures' and how these are influenced by and influence people's experiences and perceptions of the role of education, training and work in their lives.

Educational achievement and work opportunities

The overwhelming desire of most interviewees was to do a job they enjoyed and to have a reasonable quality of life; material reward was not usually the sole objective. However, some interviewees were sceptical of the role of education in helping them gain 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.

> "You get motivated to go for a job … and they can say 'I'm not having you … you are forty-five; you are too old'." (Female, age 41-50)

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 interviewees' lives but fulfilled very different purposes. Voluntary work was described as being enjoyable, 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. Some interviewees identified the low-paid and insecure nature of both some official and unofficial employment as reasons to participate in education and training to improve their prospects.

> "If you haven't got qualifications, you'll be on a low pay, but if you have you'll be on alright pay." (Female, age 16-19)

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.

Attitudes to education

The vast majority of interviewees had both beliefs in and doubts about education and training in realising a 'successful future'. Many had undertaken some form of education and training since leaving school, both formally and informally. Only a small minority had not done any education or training and 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 as their major concerns, along with scepticism that qualifications would help them in getting a job.

> "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." (Female, age 16-18)

Older interviewees also had concerns over their capacities in a learning environment. Those interviewees already using 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 loyal to the staff and peers who were supporting them. This made them disinclined to access different, more 'formal' provision.

"… We would rather come here and do it. We have got to keep this centre going." (Female, age 41-50)

Achieving personal goals

Successful futures are relative to people's current circumstances. Parents and retired people were less likely to have personal goals for the future. Whilst the 16- to 19-year-olds might identify some aspects of work as indicating success, like money and cars, they often felt this would stop them from engaging in anti-social activity; this was possibly unrealistic in the short term.

"Well, at the end of the day if I did get a decent paid job like I do want, I wouldn't have to go pinching for my money." (Male, age 16-19)

The role of social networks

Social networks played a key role in two ways. First, they helped people to find out about and access education and training and work. Second, they restricted activities and imposed boundaries and/or expectations of anti-social and dependent behaviour.

"Well, like I say, me and this guy we did the Electronics course and we did Networking together. We used to grab leaflets. We were both sort of educationally disabled." (Male, age 21-30)

The features of the local area that people were very negative about were fear of crime and the area's bad reputation. In particular, people were not keen to engage in activities that would mean regular, patterned absences from their home. They were also sceptical about employers' and others' responses to their post codes. 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.

Conclusions

This study suggests that the way existing policy understands the relationship between individual opportunity, education, training and employment is inconsistent with the conceptions and experiences of a significant number of the people it is directed at, specifically socially excluded groups.

Employers

- Members of socially excluded 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 recruitment process.

Education and training providers

- 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. Local and relatively informal educational settings, very close to highly localised communities, may be a way into education for some. In addition, members of these groups require very substantial degrees of support, both financial and social, in order to succeed on courses which they take.

Policy

- 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 personal hopes for the future.

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

- Family life is 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 an important factor drawing people away from more legitimate opportunities.

A number of broader policies 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 forces the benefit system into a disciplinary mode of operation that many disadvantaged people experience as oppressive and consequently resist or withdraw from.

  "And basically, I was forced to go on a course or lose my benefit at the end." (Female, age 31-40)

- Related to this issue is the continuing 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 education and training. This 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.

  "Because obviously if I go into a job that I am not going to like I am going to be back on the dole in 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." (Female, age 16-19)

About the study

In-depth interviews were conducted with a mixed range of 88 people aged 16 and over around the research site, a large, predominantly white, council estate in the inner area of a large city in the North of England. Most interviewees had left school at the earliest opportunity with no or few qualifications.

How to get further information

The full report, **'Successful futures?' Community views on adult education and training** by Helen Bowman, Tom Burden and John Konrad, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 902633 89 X, price £12.95).