Responding to the ‘needs’ of young people in jobs without training (JWT): critical research on evidence-based policy and practice

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Introduction
Young people in 'jobs without training' (JWT) are all around us: working in shops cafés, building sites: they are ubiquitous but invisible. For policy makers they are a problem group who need to be shepherded back into education, but in fact very little is known about them. In this paper we report on a large scale project in the SW region of England (Quinn et al. 2008). The research involved a collaboration between university researchers and Connexions Personal Advisers working with young people mainly aged between 17 and 18. Its main purpose was to critically examine and explore the experiences of this marginalised and socially disadvantaged group as they moved into and out of work, with a view to influencing the policy debate through a deeper understanding of their lives. The assumption of our approach is that young people have not been involved or consulted in the development of policies aimed specifically at meeting their ‘needs’ by increasing their employability.

Background and context
The issue of youth unemployment and social exclusion has attracted much interest in recent years, with a government policy, particularly in the last ten years, directed towards meeting a set of external criteria and targets (Social Exclusion Unit 1999, Mulvey 2006). Support, advice and guidance, policy has been be targeted towards those young people who are in JWT or who are NEET (not in education, employment or training). JWT is essentially a policy construct, and has been defined as being employed for 16 hours a week or over, not being engaged in formal training which leads to a nationally accredited qualification at Level 2 and not having Level 2 qualifications [1] (DfEE, 1998, Anderson et al. 2006). Although they are in work young people in JWT are viewed as a deficit category, ‘dead end kids in dead end jobs’ (see Quinn et al. 2008), with low levels of functional literacy and numeracy skills, and a paucity of life and vocational skills.
The policy response has been to provide baseline training to increase levels of functional literacy and numeracy and the general skills level of the population. As the influential Leitch report (Leitch 2006) notes, the proportion of young people remaining in education in the UK is currently below the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average, and this is far from the aspiration to benchmark against the upper quartile by 2020 (OECD 2006, 2007).

The research
Our perspective is that policy has been predicated on a set of assumptions about young people and their needs, yet young people themselves have barely been consulted. Our research which was funded by the European Social Fund, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and Connexions, sought to address four key research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of young people in JWT? How can these be best understood?
2. What are the interests and enthusiasms of young people in JWT?
3. How can Connexions services best understand and respond to these diverse interests of young people in JWT?
4. At what points in their careers and in what ways are young people in JWT most receptive to moving into learning opportunities?

The research comprised both a quantitative and a qualitative dimension. Building on a preliminary analysis of national and local statistical data, it comprised 155 telephone interviews with 100 young people conducted by 10 Connexions Personal Advisers (PAs), 27 in-depth interviews with 14 young people and a focus group meeting with 3 young people. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted up to one hour; all were recorded and fully transcribed. The research also included three capacity building/development days with the PAs and a participative seminar with key stakeholders where we were able to share and test our findings from the research.

We were aware from the outset that one of the main problems that we would face would be to ‘find’ young people in JWT who represented the breadth and diversity of the cohort. In order to achieve this we arranged to work alongside front-line Connexions PAs who were involved directly in the project as co-researchers. The PAs were ideally suited to this role since they work directly with young people providing support and advice to achieve government targets (Mulvey 2006).

A second problem that we faced was deciding who to interview. For example, whilst young people who take a ‘break’ from study for a year between school and college or university are not engaging in Level-2 training/education (the baseline for determining JWT status), we did not wish to over-represent them
within the interview cohort. In order to circumvent this problem, we focused upon young people who had been receiving Connexions advice for more than a year since leaving school. We also sought to represent the diversity of the cohort, and whilst we managed fairly even gender splits between males and females, ethnic origins were almost wholly white, reflecting the predominantly rural demographic.

A third problem concerned the various definitions that are used by different government agencies, for example whether the data-sets refer to full-time or part-time working and what ‘job-related training’ actually refers to. This problem of definition was evident when making the comparison between the Connexions (2005) data and that from the Office for National Statistics Youth Cohort Studies (ONS 2005a, 2005b, 2006). The Connexions data suggest that only 30% of Year 11 leavers were receiving job-related training in 2002, whereas the ONS data suggest a much higher figure of 80%. Data from the Learning and Training at Work Survey (DfES 2006), produced a different picture. Clearly employers define training in a different way to the ONS, whose definition of training is different again to that used by the DfES.

**Attitudes to school and college and the transition to work**
The young people in our JWT sample were not generally high academic achievers. Many welcomed the chance to leave school and saw it as an opportunity for a fresh start. They had enjoyed school at primary level. However, as they progressed through their secondary school careers, school increasingly became a source of discomfort and stress, because of bullying or poor performance:

> *I never used to enjoy school. I used to get picked on all the time ... I used to go and see a counsellor at school but I just didn't have … I couldn't talk to anyone.* (George)

Only 3 of the 68 young people (approximately 4%) that were re-interviewed wanted to go to FE college for training. They wanted to move on with their lives and the idea of attending college was something that they wanted to avoid. Moreover, they could see their friends struggling at college and saw no advantage in become stuck in a what they saw as a pointless cycle of unwanted training:

> *...so they’ve all finished their courses and realised they don’t want to do it so they are doing more courses.* (Fred)

> *...some of them went to college then dropped out, then tried a different one then dropped out again … pointless isn’t it.* (Jane)

One of the changes over the last few years has been a shift towards youth transitions that are lengthier and more prolonged (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, Lawy, 2003, Goodwin and O’Connor 2007, Shildrick and Macdonald 2007). The interview data provide some indication of the complexity of these
transitions. For example, Jo’s experience of working overseas in a Greek hotel was valued by her despite the very poor pay and lack of formal training that she received:

*It kind of opened my eyes, because I thought it would be all plain sailing, it would be fine and it would be just like here [England]. How wrong could I be?* (Jo)

She also expressed dissatisfaction with her current supermarket job:

*It’s not something that I am going to want to do in ten years’ time you know. At the moment for me it’s just something to tide me over until I get something else.* (Jo)

*For me work means I can live here and I can save my money. I can get to Canada. So to me, work is brilliant.* (Jo)

Jo did not see herself following an uninterrupted career path or progression route into a career of choice (see Quinn et al., 2005). Although Jo’s engagement with JWT did have a future orientation it was not centred around work but around her desire to do other things.

While GCSE examination grades are important as a means of securing progression through the formal examination and training system, they do not inevitably impact on the capabilities of the young people in their work-roles:

*It makes you realise that GCSEs and stuff really don’t affect what you do outside, workwise and dealing with real life situations, you realise there’s a lot more stuff that’s more important than grades. Getting a job really does depend on what sort of person you are and whether people can work with you.* (Liz)

Nor do qualifications necessarily lead to a job. Indeed many of the young people that we interviewed secured employment though friends and family rather than through formal networks. Gary was not untypical. He explained that he was initially involved in a work-placement programme whilst at school (two days per week) working at the same place as his uncle:

*I trained at my uncle’s garage … He works for someone up there who used to like … known him for years.* (Gary)

**Structural constraints**

Almost all of the young people that we interviewed were working-class, using their parents’ occupations as an indicator. Many had not had a successful experience of school and left with qualifications which fell far below the government’s target of 5 A*-C GCSEs. Gary, for example who we have already described was in the ‘special needs’ group in his school with parents who were not well off. Many of the problems that the young people faced were a direct consequence of poverty and their restricted life-chances:
A lot of people struggle ... A few people I’ve met say they’ve broken up with their families, they’ve hated their life and they’ve tried to do stupid things ... I don’t know why they do it but they’ve cut themselves.

(George)

These young people did not have the luxury of taking a gap-year like their middle class counterparts prior to their university careers (du Bois-Reymond 1998), rather their anticipated careers and futures (Ball et al. 1999) were more tentative and speculative. Their employment opportunities were limited and, in many of the cases that we described, seasonal, compared to young people in large urban areas:

Regional ONS data indicate that young women in the South West are four times more likely than males to be employed part-time, often in clerical and secretarial work, in childcare, hairdressing and sales (South West Observatory 2007). Those wishing to break into traditional male preserves faced substantial problems. Despite legislation and a supposedly more tolerant and equal working environment, old prejudices and normalised inequalities were very much in evidence:

It’s good. It’s going okay. I am having the mick taken out of me by a lot of the men ... There are two girls up in accounts but ... I am the only one [doing an apprenticeship]. There were two other girls up there [on block release]) one’s a mechanic and the other one’s a parts girl ... And there’s probably four or five hundred boys. (Liz)

Recommendations
One of the main findings that emerged from our research is that although young people in JWT are defined as a ‘deficit category’ in need of help and support, their aspirations interests and engagement and interest in the world around them is little different from that of many other groupings, particularly of young people. They are not ‘dopes’ who sit around on their backsides, but, as we have indicated, are active co-constructors of their lives, asserting degrees of agency and control over different aspects of their lives including their self-identifications and presentations. They differ simply because of the way in which they have been labelled (Matza 1969). As we have indicated JWT is a policy construct with young people in this category commonly elided with those young people who have been described as having ‘Status Zero’ (Rees et al. 1996) who are NEET. The relative stability of the overall NEET and JWT numbers masks great fluidity within the category. 40% of our sample of 68 reinterviewees took up some form of training during the period of the research with 18% moving out of the category altogether. This was however matched by 17% of our sample of young people slipping out of the JWT category into NEET.
This does not mean however that there is not a problem to be addressed, and in this respect we have been careful not to romanticise the experiences of this group of young people, who have been targeted by the government as being ‘at risk’ or at least in need of help and support in their quest for ‘meaningful’ employment. What is clear is that they do not face a level playing field in the job-market when compared to their middle-class counterparts. They face structural inequalities and are disadvantaged in terms of housing and schooling and are more likely to be struggling against poverty. Yet despite these disadvantages and inequalities the young people themselves were generally very positive and did not see themselves in pejorative terms but rather as survivors – different from their contemporaries who seem beyond hope who are involved in crime and drug-use.

The young people in our interview sample demonstrated a willingness to learn ‘on-the-job’ skills that would enable them to perform more effectively in their work-roles, valuing ‘hard’ work-related skills and ‘softer’ social skills that enabled them to integrate into workplace communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). Many did not feel that they were working in ‘dead-end’ jobs but felt they were learning useful and credible skills in the workplace and much preferred this to accredited courses of dubious quality and relevance. This engagement of young people needs to be somehow recognised in their training: for example, the influence of social networks, including the influence of mentors and role-models. We are not suggesting that this should be formally accredited, rather that it is good practice and should be incorporated both into the apprenticeship or other training undertaken by young people (Unwin and Fuller 2008) and in their pre-employment experiences. At the same time, opportunities for young people to sample different work experiences need to be made more accessible, with associated funding mechanisms structured so that they do not penalise those providers with taster courses for young people where there is no formalised end assessment (Equal Brighton and Hove 2008). Moreover, college and other provider programmes should be resourced in a way that does not stigmatise the young people, for example by teaching them in under-resourced buildings.

One of the claims of the government is that IAG systems and support structures need to be holistic and universal (Colley, 2003) ensuring that ‘everyone is able to access the help they need to take stock of where they are in achieving their goals and ambitions, and to get the support they need’ (DIUS, 2007, p.28). Moreover, they should be organised so that they reflect the diversity of the cohort and the various needs of young people, and not just focus upon reducing unemployment. As we have seen, such sentiments are echoed by professionals in the field who continue to call for a service that is holistic and available for all. What remains to be seen is how 14-19 IAG can be integrated with the post-19 adult careers service and whether the claim to universality is possible with government agenda that is target driven. As a starting point, such a move will require a national policy initiative to develop a
single and national data-base across all the Connexions regions to replace
the current databases that are neither consistent nor accurate. Whilst there is
a recognition, particularly in *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003), of the need for
closer integration, coherent planning and a multi-agency approach, systems
and structures of support, the market structure, competitive ethic and funding
mechanisms all seem to militate against a successful holism.

Writing this concluding paragraph at a time when the British economy has
fallen into deep recession (April 2009), with unemployment rising in all age
groups, serves only to emphasise our final point that the ‘problem’ of young
people in jobs without training is not a problem of the young people
themselves, but a manifestation of other structural and cultural problems. It is
fundamentally a problem of inequality and while the recommendations that we
have made will ameliorate the problem, only a restructuring of schooling, a
major investment in local economies, adequate infrastructures of transport
and housing and a shift in cultural narratives about what constitutes a
successful and valid life will really improve opportunities for them. It is this
investment rather than the mantra of up-skilling or re-skilling that will provide
the basis for a proper and long-lasting solution to the problems that have
been identified.

**Note**
[1] The Qualification and Credit Framework is a formal system of accreditation
that enables qualifications to be referenced against one another.
Qualifications range from those at entry level through level-2 (GCSE), level-3
(A-level; NVQ 3) to postgraduate qualifications.

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