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Re-engaging NEET young people through employability programmes: oakum picking in the twenty-first century

Robin Simmons

The New Poor Law of 1834 was designed to prevent the unemployed from receiving 'outdoor relief' – or, in other words, it aimed to stop the poor from being provided with money, or benefits in kind, to aid their sustenance. In most cases, rather than being given access to 'dole' payments those without work would be offered only 'indoor relief'. This meant a place in the dreaded workhouse. There were various reasons for disqualifying the poor from receiving welfare benefits, one of which was financial expediency: the ruling class had long regarded the existing Poor Law as a drain on their wealth. Such concerns were heightened by rising levels of unemployment during the early nineteenth century and the economic downturn which followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars. There were, however, also deep-rooted ideological beliefs underpinning the New Poor Law. Not least of these was the notion that giving money to the poor only served to encourage laziness and welfare dependency.

One of the key principles underpinning the New Poor Law was the notion of 'less eligibility'. This meant that conditions in the workhouse were intended to be less favourable than those which could be afforded by even the most poorly paid labourer. At best, this meant a Spartan regime: workhouses had strict rules governing diet, dress, behaviour and discipline; men and women were segregated, and children separated from their parents. Inmates were required to work long hours performing arduous tasks in return for very basic levels of food and shelter. In many cases workhouses were also brutal institutions. Perhaps the most vivid example of this was the notorious Andover workhouse scandal of 1845 where inmates were reduced to fighting for the privilege of sucking the marrow from rotting bones in order to survive; but leaving aside this particularly gruesome case, anybody who has read Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* will be familiar with some of the privations of life in the workhouse. Either way, those able to avoid a stay in one of these institutions usually did so. Despite often being compared to prisons, some members of the ruling class viewed the workhouse as being as much about rehabilitation as punishment, and it was often assumed that a strict regime of hard work and regulation would re-moralise inmates and instil an ethos of industry within them. Most workhouses provided some form of education for pauper children - although learning how to read and write was less of a priority than matters of discipline and religious instruction, and industrialists would often purchase child labour in the form of 'pauper apprentices' from the workhouse.

Whether they were adults or children, all inmates were required to work in order to earn their keep. Typical tasks were rock breaking, crushing bones, or perhaps most infamously, oakum picking. Oakum picking – the process of laboriously unravelling tightly bound lengths of rope covered in tar – was a boring, demanding and unpleasant task which became so synonymous with life in the workhouse that these institutions were sometimes known colloquially as 'The Spike', in reference to the spikes used by inmates to unpick oakum. You may now be asking yourself what relevance all this has today. Thankfully, workhouses no longer exist, but today millions of people without jobs are unable to register as unemployed, and many are required to undertake various training or work substitution programmes in order to receive benefits. Young people categorised as not in education, employment or training (NEET) are a case in point. Most 16-to-18 year-olds labelled as NEET are not

entitled to welfare benefits and, although the NEET category contains a range of young people with a variety of backgrounds, interests and abilities, being NEET is often associated with a range of problems, such as an increased risk of involvement in crime, drug use or teenage parenthood, as well as long-term unemployment.

Although there have been particular concerns about youth unemployment since the 1970s, contemporary policy discourses surrounding NEET young people are especially strident. One assumption is that there is something inherently 'wrong' with those young people not participating in work, education or training, and it is almost as if being NEET is seen as an individual illness or condition which must be cured. Consequently, over recent years, there have been a series of policy initiatives which have aimed to engage or re-engage NEET young people through various forms of pre-vocational and work-based learning. Although the names of these schemes often change and, over time, numerous training courses have been launched and re-launched, basically they all aim to do the same thing: to increase the 'employability' of young people. In other words, they try to imbue participants with the attitudes, dispositions and personal qualities deemed necessary for the labour market. Despite the fact that the causes of unemployment lie as much in a lack of demand for labour as in the characteristics of the workforce successive governments have chosen to overlook such matters. Under neo-liberal regimes only 'supply side' initiatives are ideologically acceptable; as was the case in Victorian Britain, the state is not permitted to regulate labour or product markets, or to stimulate the demand for employment.

This leads me to the findings from research I am currently undertaking with my Huddersfield University colleagues, Lisa Russell and Ron Thompson. For the last year we have been involved in an ethnographic study exploring the lives of NEET young people as they move between different sites of unemployment, education, work and training. Unfortunately, we have found that many NEET young people find much of the training aimed at them to be neither stimulating or of practical use – and, at its worst, they find it boring, irrelevant and, frankly, soul-destroying. Although such programmes are often given exciting sounding names such as *Explorer*, *Pathfinder* or *Venture*, often their content is mundane, tiresome and repetitive. In many ways, NEET young people are oakum picking in the twenty-first century. Much of the 'training' they are required to undertake is based upon inculcating NEET young people with what Basil Bernstein (2000) described as generic modes of knowledge – or in other words, generalised, de-contextualised activities such as 'problem solving', thinking skills' or 'learning to learn'. Whilst such activities are not necessarily without utility if accompanied by other forms of learning embedded in particular vocational, intellectual or social contexts, when they are delivered without an underpinning core of subject-based knowledge and skills they are of little value. They become deeply problematic when, rather than providing access to new knowledge or skills based upon traditional craft or technical ability, such practices are coupled with the fetishisation of routine processes such as repeated CV writing, skills audits, and similar activities. There are, after all, only so many times a young person can update a CV or improve their interview technique before an unavoidable conclusion is reached: that is, coherent skills and knowledge need to be gained in order to add substance to any softer inter-personal abilities that have been accrued.

It is unsurprising to find that many NEET young people are reluctant to engage in such training programmes. As the recent *Wolf Review of Vocational Education* (2011) highlighted, many low-level vocational or pre-vocational training programmes provide participants with little or no advantage and, in some cases, actually result in negative labour market returns. The harsh reality is that most

employers continue to prefer to recruit those with more traditional qualifications based upon recognised forms of academic or vocational knowledge. It is both sad and ironic that provision which purports to help some of our most disadvantaged young people to find work appears, in some ways, to contribute to their continued exclusion. Obviously, this is a significant problem – not only for NEET young people but also for those involved in delivering employability programmes. It must, however, be stressed that most practitioners working in this area are highly committed to the welfare and progress of young people. Whilst the direction and purpose of education and training is driven, to a large degree, by social and economic change and the priorities of policymakers, practitioners are not without agency. Rarely do they simply transfer policy decisions into practice in a straightforward or uncritical fashion. Indeed, educationalists have an important role to play in mediating and sometimes subverting policy, and there is a long tradition of practitioner resistance and progressive practice in working with marginalised learners - see, for example, the work of Dennis Gleeson (1983) on YTS tutors, and Patrick Ainley (1990) on teachers delivering TVEI in schools.

There are nevertheless significant constraints placed upon practitioners, and those working with NEET young people are subject to particular pressures: a curriculum increasingly prescribed, codified and controlled by the state; a more and more target-driven culture; and the vicissitudes of funding which militate against stability and continuity of provision. Furthermore, low pay, high staff turnover, and the poor working conditions under which practitioners toil often detract from the experience they are able to provide. Having said this, no training programme however effectively delivered can compensate for a lack of job opportunities. If the state is serious about providing meaningful opportunities for NEET young people there needs to be significant change not only in the nature of education and training provided to those without work but in the political economy more broadly. Rather than concentrating almost totally on supply side issues there needs to be a concerted attempt to stimulate the demand for labour, and especially skilled labour. Admittedly, this is not an easy or straightforward challenge; however, as Martin Allen and Patrick Ainley (2011) argue, there are tangible ways of beginning to do this and, as they suggest, a national programme of public works, environmental projects, and housing regeneration would be a useful starting point – as well as being a productive, responsible and just use of public money. Without such changes many young people will be left picking oakum almost indefinitely.

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