
HOW YOUNG PEOPLE FORMULATE THEIR VIEWS ABOUT THE FUTURE EXPLORATORY RESEARCH

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Background

The aim of this research is to enhance the understanding of how those in year 7 think about educational and career issues and what factors shape this thinking. Young people in year 7 during 2008/09 are the first cohort that will be affected by the Raising Participation Age (RPA) arrangements which requires participation to 17 by 2013 and 18 in 2015. We have evidence about how young people make choices at 14 and 16 and this suggests that by 14, many young people already had a sense of what they wanted to do but they did not always have the necessary skills in decision making to make optimal choices. As many young people make their decisions early they say they want IAG as early as possible. However, there is no evidence about how they are making choices about the future before they reach 14. This project is an exploratory one, seeking to map in more detail the attitudes of young people at this stage in their educational careers.

Key findings:

- ◆ Over 85% of the Year 7 pupils feel they know the job they want to do in the future and 65% of these pupils have held these views for over 2 years. These jobs are drawn from narrow parts of the occupational structure and over 80% are 'higher status positions' from NS-SEC 1-3.
- ◆ A high percentage of Year 7 want to go to university: 75%. The majority believe it will help them reach their preferred employment destination or give them a better chance of employment.
- ◆ Aspirations for higher education differ by geography with considerably less pupils wishing to go from the rural area in this study.
- ◆ Pupils from lower socio-economic groups are as likely to want to go to HE and pursue high status jobs as their counterparts from higher socio-economic groups at this stage.
- ◆ The pupils' level of knowledge regarding post 14 educational routes and how to achieve their employment/educational aspirations is low, which is not surprising at this age.
- ◆ Young people are developing 'career choice identities' or value systems which inform what they count as 'success' and which rank the academic over the vocational.
- ◆ Young people see the need for some form of IAG at this stage of their school life. Not necessarily careers advice but guidance and experiences to help them think through their options and help them develop their decision making skills and broaden their career choice identities.

Objectives

The key objectives of the research were to understand the role of prior attainment, parents, professionals, peers, individual attributes, structural and contextual factors and also what career related activities motivate them. This qualitative work sought to explore how developed their views on the future are, what is most likely to affect their thinking and to consider the most effective ways we can equip young people with the skills to make optimal decisions.

Methodology

The study consisted of focus group workshops with young people in 27 different schools in 3 different areas of the country. Participating schools reflect a range of attainment performance and school 'type' i.e. mixed / single sex, faith / non-faith, 11-16/18, academy / community or voluntary aided. A total of 610 young people participated in the study from a range of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds and with differing ability levels. The workshops consisted of group discussions with pupils and a series of written tasks for the young people to complete. The findings combine statistical analysis of data from the written tasks, with the feedback from class discussions with the pupils.

Summary of Findings

They think they 'know' what they want to do - but not how to get there

A very high number, nearly 90%, of the young people feel they 'know' what occupation they want to do in the future, can name this occupation and are relatively sure about this with 65% holding their views for over 2 years. The research indicates that young people at this age have thought actively and in most cases in some depth (relative to their age) about future occupations. This 'knowledge' has to be seen in context however. Previous evidence indicates that as young people become increasingly aware of their own abilities and the opportunities that the labour market offers their preferences change over time. However, to the young people these preferences are real at this point in time. It is important that policy-makers, teachers and parents recognize this and factor it in when offering IAG support to young people.

As may be expected at this age, the knowledge that year 7 have of the relationship between occupations and the qualifications they require is very low, as is the understanding of

educational pathways post 14. However, they are clearly thinking about future educational / employment routes now and may benefit from IAG which helps develop their decision making skills and broaden their view of the opportunities on offer.

Aspirations are high but vary by geography

The occupations that year 7 pupils want to pursue are predominantly higher earning/status ones. They are drawn from particular parts of the occupational scale - it appears that year 7 pupils have a 'patchy' view of the occupational structure and there are large swathes of jobs they do not either see or consider as employment options at this stage. Three quarters of young people want to go to Higher Education (HE). This majority holds across different types of school, with pupils from different genders and social background and differing levels of prior attainment. The main reason these pupils want to go to HE is to 'improve themselves' and get a better job. Slightly more girls (82%) than boys (68%) want to go to HE which is consistent with the higher number of females going to HE in recent years than males. Surprisingly, more young people from lower rather than higher socio-economic backgrounds (85% as opposed to 66%) want to go to HE so there was little evidence of 'lower aspirations' regarding higher education from the groups that it is usually associated with. However, there were differences by geography with higher proportions of young people wanting to go to HE from the more urban areas.

University means success

By year 7, young people have clearly developed ideas of occupational hierarchy. There is a very strong association between success and university attendance and in particular participation in courses associated with professional occupations. This view of success is common to young people who do not want to go to university as well as those who do and different types of school / social background.

Parents matter but so do teachers and school

The influence of parents comes through very strongly in this study. Across gender, school type and social background parents are seen as sources of support and their backing is very important at this stage. There is evidence that going to HE is based in some cases on wanting to imitate their parents but the majority want to go because it fits with their own ambitions. However, the influence of a significant older

person / adult is not confined to parents. There were numerous examples of the influence of adult relatives and older siblings / cousins, and teachers. The ability of a teacher to shape the young people's horizons at this stage should not be under-estimated - they exist as examples of success and their support is crucial also. The young people were less keen to acknowledge the influence of the media and their friends directly when asked, but in the case of the media in particular, it did come through as having an important role that could be larger than the pupils are willing to explicitly recognize.

Year 7 pupils are developing 'career choice identities'

The employment preferences of the pupils in the majority of cases will not be realised. Comparing the jobs that the young people want to do against the numbers of people in the population doing those jobs reveals starkly how the odds are against them. As they get older and more aware of their own abilities and the labour market their views will re-adjust. What may be more robust however, are the principles regarding educational and career issues / choices that they are developing. The study shows such principles combining together in mutually reinforcing but also in contradictory ways to lay the foundations for 'career choice identities' or value systems amongst the young people. These identities can be understood as the young person's framework by which they interpret and understand employment / educational choices and issues. This process is at different stages of development across individuals and groups but virtually all the pupils have begun it. The areas in which the pupils are developing these principles are:

- What is the relationship between education and employment?
- Who do I think is successful?
- What constitutes success?
- What jobs and courses bring success?
- How do you decide what job is right for you?

Year 7 understand IAG options

Young people themselves see the need for some form of IAG at this stage of their school life. Not necessarily careers advice but guidance and experiences to help them think through their options and help them develop

their decision making skills and broaden their career choice identities. Year 7 pupils were able to consider various support options and express their preferences regarding them and in the majority of cases support these choices with cogent reasoning. Most year 7 pupils understand the merits of learning about what an occupation or university is like to help inform their choice process. Such activities, where they can see or experience future educational / career pathways, are seen as most useful, as is the regular support of an advice professional.

Additional Information

The full report (DCSF-RR152) can be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Vikki McAuley, Young People Analysis Division, N6, DCSF, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ

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