

Career Guidance & Excluded Young People

Case Example: Working Roots

We believe that issues of inequality pose a serious challenge for mainstream approaches to career guidance. Traditional models of career guidance in the UK tend to be organised around mainstream education in schools or colleges but if young people are excluded or choosing not to access mainstream services, then it is highly likely they will also be excluded from any form of career guidance. If young people do not fit existing structures and services, the young people are deemed to be the problem not the structures or services.

In this article, we share a brief case example from practise with 'excluded' young people living in deprived areas in the UK; young people not in education, employment or training. Engagement of excluded young people highlighted the need for an alternative holistic approach to 'career guidance' and led to development of a new bespoke programme: Working Roots.

Voice and experience of excluded young people

Central to our approach is valuing and validating the voice and experience of excluded young people. We aim to gain understanding from the perspective of young people; to identify and accept their truth about their lived experience. We believe this is fundamental in supporting people to develop meaningful solutions to their problems.

Using participatory person centred methods, we engaged excluded young people aged 16yrs+ living in deprived areas in the north east of England. We supported young people to work together in a series of interactive conversation style workshops which took place at venues within localities where young people lived e.g. community centres, pubs, youth projects etc. A total of 88 young people participated.

Through this process we gained valuable insights into the experience of young people; how they perceived themselves and wider society; views about careers and employment, including barriers and issues they identified as restricting them from engaging in learning and limiting employment opportunities.

Key insights included the following:

- Young people felt far removed from employment; many were from families of 3rd / 4th generation unemployment. Talk of career guidance wasn't very meaningful.
- Most participants described negative experience in mainstream education excluded from school at a young age. Confidence levels, literacy / numeracy skills were very low; many had undiagnosed learning difficulties and struggled to write their own name at 16yrs+ and were very embarrassed about this.
- All participants wanted meaningful opportunities to learn /obtain qualifications describing failure in mainstream systems in terms of negative labels, attitudes of professionals, not fitting in, dislike of classroom environment, lack of support.

- All participants had a strong desire to work and wanted opportunities to engage in 'real life' work activity; all wanted to earn money and not live on state benefits.
- Personal issues also acted as barriers including the need for support with relationships / family, peer group culture, low social skills, low confidence / self-esteem, feeling isolated with no one believing in them.
- Attitudes of some professionals - young people feeling stigmatised, treated with lack of respect. Dreams and aspirations had been knocked out of them through cycle of failure in mainstream and they felt angry and frustrated.

Developing an appropriate response: Working Roots

In response to the voice and experience of excluded young people a new cross sector partnership developed between Justice Prince CIC, North Tyneside Council and Kier North Tyneside (a private sector construction company). All organisations worked collaboratively over a long period of time to develop a meaningful solution; a new bespoke full time work based guidance, education and learning programme to tackle identified needs and issues.

The new programme: Working Roots is a full-time programme supporting excluded young people aged 16yrs – 18yrs living in North Tyneside. Working Roots was launched as a pilot in Sept. 2013 providing 15 full time places, it is now in year four and has recently increased in size to provide 24 places per year.

Core elements of Working Roots

- 5 days per week Monday to Friday 8.30am -3.30pm for one full academic year.
- Young people work in small groups of 4-5 trainees; each group has a qualified supervisor.
- Qualifications in key functional skills: IT, Maths and English & vocational qualifications in either construction or horticulture.
- Focus on practical skills; learning and assessment take place in the work environment.
- A Learning Mentor provides guidance / supports personal social development; advocates on behalf of young people re issues impacting on their lives.
- A weekly allowance is paid related to attendance / progression.
- 3.5 - 4 days per week delivering 'real life' neighbourhood services; painting and decorating, fencing and gardening.
- Locality based guidance / employability to support positive progression into further learning, education and employment.
- Integration into communities / society through engagement with local people to support delivery of community projects e.g. repairing community buildings.
- Create new track record of performance / achievement, access to references.

Outcomes, Transformation & Change

Working Roots has proved to be extremely successful in re-engaging excluded young people in the learning process, increasing access to employment opportunities and improving overall quality of life.

Attendance levels are extremely high for this target group averaging 95% and over the past three years the vast majority of young people; 43 out of 45 have successfully completed the programme gaining qualifications and 30 have progressed directly into employment, further education or training. All participants have progressed dramatically in terms of self-confidence, skills, knowledge and understanding.

“Working Roots has totally changed my life because it’s changed me, it’s the first thing I’ve ever stuck in my whole life! I had a real opportunity to learn new things...I realised I could actually do things...it meant such a lot knowing people really believed in me and that made me start to believe in myself”.

John (Working Roots Trainee)

Active participation in the programme has increased the social inclusion of excluded young people into wider society, transforming the way young people perceive themselves and the way they are perceived by others. Stigmatising labels are redefined through everyday actions and status as trainees.

“...people look at me differently now and everyone talks to me... I love wearing my work clothes because people can see I’m a trainee, I feel great and love it!”

Liam (Working Roots Trainee)

Wider transformation and changes are also evident. For example, mainstream education providers have totally restructured services delivering courses in the community with limited time in classrooms; increased flexibility with bespoke one to one support and work in small groups; assessment in the work environment.

Excluded young people are no longer defined as a problem needing to adapt to fit structures; structures and services have adapted and transformed in direct response to the voice and experience of excluded young people!

Can you identify any similarities or differences to career guidance practise in your own geographical context? Is this approach relevant? Could it be adapted and applied in your work?