BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN A SEASIDE TOWN IN THE UK

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Abstract - This paper presents the findings of the research based on 52 interviews with unemployed young people in the UK (aged 16 to 24). It details their experiences of employment support and services, and their perspectives on the development on a new, innovative approach to providing support into employment for young people. The aim of the the research to engage purposively with a variety of young people in a small seaside town who were out of work, in order to explore their views on the potential development of an impartial, multichannel single point of access in the town which would endeavour to help young people make the best use of the employment services and initiatives that already exist.

Keywords - Youth; Unemployment; Barriers; Local Economy; Support;

I. INTRODUCTION

The majority of the young people who took part in the research were classed as being long-term unemployed (claiming–Jobseeker's Allowance JSA – for more than 6 months), although some had been claiming for less than 3 months, and also young people who were not claiming any job-seeking benefits. The qualitative verbatim and visual data provided by participants provided detailed insights into their perceptions, experiences and the services available to them, and identified barriers (either actual or perceived) to accessing support. Some young people, for example, talked about using crystal meth and other drugs and turning to crime to make ends meet.

It should be noted that this study is based on the views and experiences of the 52 young people who participated voluntarily in the study and are, therefore, not fully representative of all young people in the town. Although concerns may be raised from a positivist perspective over the small sample size, and the difficulty in replicating and generalising from the study, these are common disadvantages associated with qualitative research. Our methodological approach was appropriate to meet the objectives of the study and other methods may not have provided the rich insights into the young people's experiences which are presented in this report. Furthermore, whilst opportunity sampling is sometimes viewed as a less robust form of sample selection (than, for example, a random sample strategy more commonly used in surveys), it is widely accepted in the research community as being employed by social researchers studying hard-to-access groups.

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Engage with a minimum of 50 unemployed young people from the town, with a particular emphasis on young people who have been unemployed for more than three months.
2. Provide a detailed understanding of the characteristics and circumstances of unemployed young people in the Local area.
3. Identify barriers which prevent or discourage young people from engaging with existing employment support services and consider how these may be overcome.
4. Describe the levels and types of support unemployed young people would like to be able to access to inform an innovative approach to tackling youth unemployment.
5. Seek young people's views on potential locations for a youth employment center and what this should look and feel like in order to provide a welcoming and supportive environment.

II. DETAILS METHODOLOGICAL

The research presented in this report adopted a broadly ethnographic participatory approach throughout to empower young people to share their experiences, views and ideas. Our approach set out to be both flexible and adaptive to the context of the participants, and we worked collaboratively with commissioners, key stakeholders and young people to investigate the experiences of unemployment for young people in Lowestoft.

This study stemmed from a post-positivist research perspective as participatory and collaborative, inductive, dependable and auditable, which seeks findings that are idiographic, valuable and qualitative. This study acknowledges that it is those that actually experience unemployment and who access support services that are the experts in their own lived realities, and as such the data collection method is broadly ethnographic. Using ideas from anthropology and human geography, the methodological approach stems from an interpretative framework which has historically argued for the uniqueness of human inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). The paradigm of childhood and youth sociology, emphasising children's and young people's position as 'social

actors' – as creative and inventive users of the world around them – has nurtured blossoming conceptual and empirical explorations of young people's agency in a range of diverse settings (O'Brien et al., 2000).

Adapted from the Mosaic approach developed by Clarke and Moss (2001) for undertaking research with young children, this study incorporated guided walks, creative focus groups and self-directed photography to engage the young people actively in the study. There are many different research strategies based on interrelated epistemological, ontological and practical foundations, and it is essential in devising a robust research strategy that the research methods effectively meet the aims and objectives of the study. Our methodological approach was appropriate to meet the objectives of the study, and other methods may not have provided the rich insights into the young people's experiences which are presented in this report. Throughout the research we were keen to address the traditional imbalances of power, and strived to ensure that the young people's voices remained at the centre of the research strategy and in the way that the findings of the study are reported.

Whilst opportunity sampling is sometimes viewed as a less robust form of sample selection than, for example, a random sample strategy more commonly used in surveys, it is widely accepted in the research community as being employed by social researchers studying hard-to-access groups. Although concerns may be raised from a positivist perspective over the small sample size, and the difficulty in replicating and generalising from the study, these are common disadvantages associated with qualitative research. It should be noted that this study is based on the views and experiences of the 52 young people who participated voluntarily in the study and are, therefore, not fully representative of all young people in the town.
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In undertaking research of this type it is important to remember that the young people participating in the research are 'often marginalized and vulnerable', and that 'participation in research provided an opportunity for some people to be listened to by a person who really did want to hear their story' (see Dickson-Swift et al., 2008: p. 42).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study successfully engaged with 52 unemployed young people. The independent evidence gathered as part of the study is based on data collected through a variety of research methods, including informal one-to-one interviews; focus groups and guided walks with 52 young people in the town who are unemployed. There are significant advantages to including guided walks alongside other types of qualitative research approaches. The guided walks made it easier for participants to take part in the study, provided context-rich research interactions, and often led to serendipitous encounters for both participants and researchers. The sample is composed of an opportunity sample, and whilst some participants were accessed through current training providers and support organisations in the town, many were interviewed after being approached in the street. 28 females and 24 males, aged between 16 and 24 voluntarily took part in the study; 46 out of the 52 participants had been unemployed for more than six months and 38 of the participants had been unemployed for more than a year.

The characteristics and circumstances of the unemployed young people in the town reflected the fact that parts of the town are some of the most deprived in the country with more than 1 in 5 children living in poverty. Youth unemployment is high, compared with national and local benchmarks, and there are areas with up to a quarter of the population on benefits. Currently, there are 375 18–24 year olds claiming JSA in the local area; 20 per cent have been claiming for more than 6 months. Many more young people will be looking for work, but not claiming any job-seeking benefits. Approximately 10 per cent of 16–18 year olds in the town are not in education, employment or training (NEET). This represents a significant proportion of young people failing to achieve their full economic and life potential.

The majority of the young people we spoke to live independently or in a hostel, rather than living with family and nearly half the participants in the study talked about being homeless at some point. All the young people discussed their experiences of living in poverty; many had often gone hungry and there were frequent references to homelessness, poverty, drug use and mental health issues. Perceptions of crime were a key theme to emerge from the analysis of the data as some had committed crimes, for example, stealing food or dealing drugs in order to survive. Most of the participants had very few formal educational qualifications and had left school early. The barriers which prevent or discourage young people from engaging with existing employment support services included the perception that there are very few jobs available in the town was the main barrier for engaging with existing employment

services. The participants' accounts highlighted many examples of a lack of social capital and lacking support from family and poverty was also identified as a barrier, in that many participants could not afford internet access, a mobile phone or smart clothes.

Many young people interviewed who had visited the job centre expressed the view that that the job centre staff did not have the time to help them and JCP staff were generally viewed as unhelpful. Fear of having their benefit sanctioned prevented many of the young people from having a positive view of job centre staff and some said that they had been asked to leave the job centre on more than one occasion when looking for information about jobs on a computer at the job centre. Lack of access to the internet was a problem for most participants and Universal Job Match was not seen as compatible with mobile technology.

Other than the job centre, the young people felt that there was little information available about job and employment services in the town. 50 of the 52 young people who took part in the study talked about 'being judged', and that that was an important factor in not only how they felt about being unemployed in Lowestoft but also in accessing different types of support. A number of young people in the study said that they did not go to the job centre because they did not want to be seen or judged as 'unemployed', even though they were. Many participants felt that dealing drugs (mainly in what they referred to as crystal meth) provided a more secure financial return than being unemployed and signing on. The participants often associated different places and organisations with different factors, or with various degrees of 'stigma'.

In order to overcome these barriers, and the levels and types of support unemployed young people would like to be able to access and all 52 participants said that they would welcome the support of a one-to-one case worker. The lack of help they felt they had from the job centre was important to what support they wanted, and they all said they wanted to have the support of 'someone who actually wanted to help them'. Many young people spoke of the importance of trust, and this was a key concept in most of the young people's narratives. The participants highlighted the importance of effective communication and being able to contact someone similar or 'get in touch' when you needed to via text, email, telephone or Facebook. All the participants, without exception, said that internet access and Wi-Fi would be essential in a new centre. The data suggests that, whilst they could see that having access to a laptop or tablet may be helpful in searching for a job, they were, however, simultaneously concerned about the theft of IT equipment. The young people who took part in the study emphasised the need for improved links with local businesses to increase opportunities for employment and also for work experience. Many said they would welcome additional advice on money management. The young unemployed people who took part in the study had very clear views on their preferred location for a potential new centre in the town.

The vast majority of the participants said that a new centre should be located in the town centre near to McDondald's. They did not want a new centre to be located south of the town which was viewed as having higher levels of crime and was associated with drug dealing. Most of the young people we interviewed did not want a new centre to be in the same location as other services – for example, youth offending, drug advice, or sexual health. The participants wanted a new centre in the town to be 'bright', 'fresh', 'welcoming' and 'modern'. Having somewhere to 'hang out' and have a drink and 'somewhere to chill' was also important. They emphasised again, though, that it was not the appearance of the new centre as such that was as important as having someone to actually help them.

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