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DEVELOPING CAREER CAPABILITIES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

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Entry to work is increasingly difficult for young people and in recent years there have been growing concerns about the harmful effects of youth unemployment. However, new ways of thinking offer ways to design interventions to prevent such harmful effects. In this research, I aimed to provide insights into new careers guidance approaches for disempowered youth, by identifying the most effective features of support programmes for young people moving into adulthood.

The Problem

Youth unemployment represents a major social and economic challenge to European nations. In the UK, the concern about young people not in employment, education, or training ('NEETs') has been a focus for Government policy.¹ In recent years, concern has begun to focus on the possibility that unemployment may have a scarring effect, doing long term damage to the economic health and well-being of young people.

Rationale For The Project

To help young unemployed people to join the job market, programmes are now being offered for some unemployed youths. However, to date, little attention has been paid to optimising the design of such programmes. One way that might prove promising to figure out what works best for such programmes is inspired by the work of Amartya Sen, an economist and philosopher. His 'capability approach' was originally a way of thinking about promoting well-being.² In essence, he advocates supporting people *to be and to do that which they have reason to value*. This approach can be seen as a reaction against

approaches to society and economics that consider people to be of value only if they are in paid work.

While Sen's capability approach was originally conceived with developing nations in mind, it has been applied in Europe, and to young people as they move into adulthood.³ There is a need for this perspective, because government funded schemes to help people into work in the UK have tended to focus on rapid placement into paid employment ("work first") and, for young people in particular, vocational skills training ("human capital"). The capability approach addresses something these interventions lack: the personal meaning of career experiences, activities, and identities for young people.

The capability approach shares with psychology an interest in self-confidence and personal agency. The concept of self-efficacy is perhaps the best developed psychological theory of confidence.⁴ Sen's notion of capabilities is much broader in its scope, encompassing not just how people think about themselves and the world around them, but also the economic, political, and legal environments within which the freedom to act is helped or blocked. The approach is intentionally broad, so as to be able to apply it to different contexts, and has been suggested to be useful in the study of careers and career guidance.⁵ Developing career capabilities might therefore help to engage unemployed young people who are particularly likely to be disempowered.

What Was Done

Fourteen young people (five females, nine males; aged 18-24) who were involved in the Princes Trust group programme took part in this research. The Princes Trust programme is a 12-week programme for disadvantaged youths intended to re-engage them in work or learning. It is a personal development programme involving team working. Each week is different, and it incorporates a residential week, charity fund raising activities, mini-enterprise, and work experience, in addition to classroom-based communications skills and job search training. The study participants differed in terms of their backgrounds and educational achievement, and all were close to the end of their 12-week programme,

enabling them to reflect back on the experience. I analysed the recordings of the interviews, looking for things that the young people had in common and how they differed.⁶

What Was Found

The young people reported a range of difficulties prior to joining the programme, including isolation and symptoms of depression. A minority also reported difficult life events or periods during which they used alcohol or drugs, or participated in criminal activity as a gang member. A characteristic that seemed to be common in the sample is the loss or absence of life-career goals prior to the programme. Experiences such as a sense of purposelessness, lack of motivation, or apathy were reported. In the language of the capability approach, the sample had not identified '*beings*' and '*doings*' that they valued; in the absence of life goals that they had reason to value, they were unable to deploy the strengths and resources already at their disposal.

In terms of the programme itself, three kinds of stories were reported by the group. Firstly, some accounts stressed the importance of the peer group during the training. The diversity of peers was both a challenge and a benefit. Initially some young people did not necessarily feel they would belong or fit in with others, but this was overcome by shared experience, and at a later stage some valued the diversity as an opportunity to learn about different kinds of people. Many reported having fun. Peer support during the emotional challenges presented by the programme tasks was also valued.

Secondly, the programme gave opportunities to overcome fear. Several participants highlighted the outdoor residential element of the programme, which included unfamiliar activities, most dramatically one which involved coping with fear of heights. Getting through this with the support of peers seemed to provide the young people with a sense of achievement and evidence of their ability to cope with challenging emotions. Giving a presentation to others on the course was also described in similar terms.

Thirdly, the programme represented a maturational experience. Participants spoke in terms of having grown up, and having done a great deal in a short space of time, sometimes in contrast to previous long periods of stagnation. A small minority also reported that having a structure to their time or being kept busy was important. For some, it was a landmark in their development to adulthood.

In terms of outcomes from the programme, improved confidence came through most strongly. Some participants reported a strengthened belief in their own ability to achieve, a sense that they can do things if they try. Some reported improved confidence in their vocational skills; although the programme included no vocationally specific training it seemed to rekindle belief in pre-existing skills. Some reported feeling better about themselves.

A majority of the young people reported developing or regaining a sense of direction from the programme. They emerged with a clearer sense of the kinds of people and the kinds of things they might be involved in. This included specific occupational goals, or study plans leading to work. Some were engaged in career exploration or job seeking activities. For some these were new goals, and for others it was reconnecting with their pre-existing aspirations. In addition several participants hoped or expected to retain friendships with peers beyond the end of the programme. Some similarly had expectations of ongoing support from programme tutors beyond the end of the programme which gave them some comfort.

All the young people involved in the study reported finding the programme of positive value and it was clear from their accounts that it had an impact on them. However, different elements of the programme worked for different people; there was no single active ingredient in the mix. It seems that the combination of confidence-building activities and a refocusing of life goals allowed the young people to use both their own capabilities and their available resources.

Making A Difference

This research, sitting alongside similar studies in other countries, helps to demonstrate that guidance and support programmes for young people can be understood in terms of the capability approach. Ultimately this may make it possible to develop a new language with which to talk to policy makers. It can inform the development of design principles for employment support programmes. Underpinning these with the capability approach ensures that individual choice and autonomy are central to this thinking.

Recommendations

- Short programmes for unemployed or disadvantaged youth as they move into adulthood may benefit from combining diverse activities, which allow participants to find something within a programme that is personally meaningful to them as a growth experience
- Such programmes may also benefit from providing elements that challenge the participants, which can build confidence and provide evidence of their ability to overcome anxiety and difficulty
- Short programmes may provide a good platform for complex interventions that could reduce or prevent the scarring effects of youth unemployment

Further Reading

An article outlining the methodological thinking behind this research has been published in *Recherches Sociologiques et Anthropologiques* as part of a special edition on social justice and issues of methodology. ⁷

References

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