

Can educational practitioners learn anything from academic social research?

Stephen Lambert, *director of the social enterprise company Education4Democracy, says yes.*

Contrary to popular belief, educational practitioners and social enterprises can learn much from the research produced by academics. Increasingly, social research can have a significant impact on policy development and practice in the real world of teaching and learning.

Our company, Education4Democracy, is one such organisation that has gained from the work of academics. Our vision is to increase democratic participation among excluded and marginalised groups such as the young, people not in employment, education or training (NEET), black and minority ethnic groups, adults with learning disabilities and those with mental health-related issues.

Huddersfield University professor Robin Simmons's research on NEETs in the North of England has helped to inform and shape our organisation's strategy and development plan for engaging various marginalised groups. It has also assisted us as educational practitioners to challenge widely held popular stereotypes. Simmons's detailed published social research demolished the myth that the young jobless are idle or feckless. Most wanted a job, a home and to start a family.

Over the past three years, Education4Democracy, through its educational programme, has visited Tyneside schools and colleges such as Kenton Academy, Daybreak, JET (Jobs, Education and Training) and youth organisations like Newcastle Scouts and Guides. The bespoke training programme has focused very much on non-democratic engagement. Not only are members of the groups indicated above not engaged in formal paid employment or training, but they are also less likely to vote in public elections or take part in civic activities. They have become disenfranchised.

The black and minority ethnic unemployment rate continues to be higher in the North East as a whole (7 per cent) and in Newcastle upon Tyne (7.4 per cent) than the average for England (6 per cent).

Additionally, a greater proportion of the city's black and minority ethnic residents are economically inactive (45 per cent), exceeding the figures for both the overall North East (39 per cent) and for England (29 per cent). Black and minority ethnic communities, especially in the west end of the city, tend to constitute a high proportion of the population in some of the most deprived areas of the city. They are vulnerable to social and civic exclusion. This reinforces much of the work conducted by Robin Simmons and his colleagues.

Education4Democracy, alongside other bodies like Newcastle City Council, recognises that unemployment and economic inactivity are higher among black and minority ethnic communities in Newcastle compared to other groups there. NEET rates amongst black and minority ethnic youth are high (10 per cent). They are less likely to vote in general elections or second order elections such as voting for local councillors.

Our organisation has run a number of learning sessions on 'Voting: How and Why' with the JET adult education centre. The sessions helped to support residents and learners to improve their civic knowledge and citizenship skills, including verbal and written communication. The sessions were delivered by Councillor Habib Rahman, Cabinet member for Communities, and myself. Young people and adults are now more confident in making sense of the democratic system and their role within it.

Research by Simmons recognises that adults with learning disabilities are a NEET sub-group. Economic inactivity rates for them are high. Many adults with learning difficulties rely on personal independence payments (PIPs), income support and housing benefit. Many are in supported housing units across Tyneside. Democratic involvement amongst them remains low. Yet we visited a number of groups, such as Daybreak in Cowgate, one of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the North, and delivered interactive sessions on voting. Contrary to popular stereotypes, we found that the

people we spoke with did have a 'reasonable' level of civic awareness. They had heard of MPs and could name them. The adults were able to discuss issues relevant to their lives. They also took part in mock-up ballots.

Similarly, Simmons's work has noted that working-class young people are more susceptible than others to being NEET. Our work on Tyneside re-affirms these findings. Again, less than 10 per cent of young people under 24 vote in local elections. Our work in local schools was able to raise awareness of democratic processes and institutions.

Professor Simmons's work has proved invaluable to our organisation in providing a detailed examination of the socio-economic circumstances of NEETs in the North, and of marginalised groups more generally. Through our own work we know that not only do these groups experience economic exclusion but also civic exclusion too. FE needs to be less dismissive of social research. It has its uses, and can assist in teaching, learning, assessment and the wider participation agenda.
