
Saving Newcastle's forgotten generation

Stephen Lambert

As thousands of youngsters celebrated 'good' A-level and GCSE results across Newcastle this summer, a significant minority will not achieve or will drop out of formal education for whatever reason.

According to recent official figures, the city has the highest number of NEETs amongst all core cities in the UK. 18 per cent of 16 to 24 year-olds are not in further education, employment or training, and the picture gets worse when examining the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods of the city. Recent data leaked indicates that almost 10 per cent of 16-18 year-olds are NEETs. Sociological analysis reveals that the biggest percentages can be found in Walker, Benwell, Scotswood, Byker, Westgate and South Heaton. In both Walker and Byker, riverside wards of the city, more than 17 per cent are classified as NEETs, an underestimate according to lead experts in the field.

The independent Children's Board trust implies there's clearly a 'social class divide' when it comes to youngsters taking part in learning and training after the age of 16, a point re-affirmed by Professor Robin Simmons and his colleagues at Huddersfield University.

According to the newly published report, the NEET group of youngsters are mainly defined by chaotic lifestyles; family breakdown; poor attendance at school; lower levels of prior educational attainment; learning disabilities; behavioural problems; informal caring duties for

disabled parents; youth crime; and workless families. In other words, vulnerable young people living in our most deprived communities. According to a recent report by Community Service Volunteers (CSV), many of these youngsters, especially living in the Walker area, lack the 'self-confidence' to stay on at school or attend the nearby Newcastle College.

Clearly, as the Trust Board rightly points out, there needs to be a 'stronger, integrated partnership approach to NEET reduction with key stakeholders'. Put simply, the City Council, secondary schools, academies and the local College need to be working more closely than ever before to tackle the city's biggest social problem. Most of these youngsters want paid work or to get onto a meaningful apprenticeship scheme. This idea of a free market in post-16 education, where schools, colleges and other post-16 providers compete against each other for learners is both outdated, irrelevant and fails to meet the significant number of disaffected young people who want to access the jobs market. Let's forget this daft notion of 'empire building' that some establishments were into, and get on with the real job of meeting the needs of what some writers have dubbed the 'lost generation' or 'forgotten generation' in our city.

Furthermore, we need detailed empirical research into why many youngsters across the city don't access training or educational opportunities beyond the age of 16, and more so why a significant

minority won't attend school even at a primary level, which clearly restricts their employment 'life chances'. That's why Newcastle Council's recent policy decision to establish a Learning Challenge scheme is to be welcomed. This project is designed to run alongside a North East Local Enterprise Partnership (NELEP) initiative to raise standards and attainment across the region.

The city-wide challenge will be co-ordinated by the Council in partnership with our family of schools, businesses and further and higher education. The Council is fully committed on improving results from youngsters who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and reducing the number of NEETs, which is unacceptably high. There's a clear need to close the gap in achievement between the most deprived children and their better-off peers, which is particularly evident between key stage two and key stage four. It will run in tandem with the government-backed NELEP plan to raise attainment across the schools and college network. It's important to ensure that as many young people as possible get on and acquire good vocational and academic qualifications. It's worth noting that the Ofsted ratings across Newcastle's schools and colleges are well above the national average, but not all young adults are benefiting from this improvement. Alarming, the attainment gap between children who are eligible for free school meals and kids who come from better-off backgrounds is much higher than the national average. It's to be hoped that Newcastle Learning Challenge will get to the bottom of why this is and what we can all do to solve it.

Colleges across the city and region are doing their best to address the issue, but anecdotal evidence indicates that many working-class youngsters are fearful of large educational institutions, which they perceive as impersonal and overly bureaucratic, with too few tutors who can empathise with their situation due to a lack of life experiences in the 'real world'.

Far better to provide meaningful vocational experiences in smaller scale, informal and non-threatening settings, such as community centres. From my own experience with working with disengaged adults who have been out of work for years, this may be the way forward. For the last two years I delivered a core 'functional skills' course (including basic literacy and numeracy, topped up with citizenship skills) in the deprived West End of the city to a small group of adults numbering eight in total. The retention rate was 90 per cent, and seven completed the course successfully – a passport to further learning opportunities.

As Newcastle's economy starts to recover there will be job opportunities in the care sector, the hospitality sector (witness the number of hotels

sprouting up across the city centre) and green industries. Let's target resources on these excluded communities, and give these youngsters a chance to acquire NVQs alongside apprenticeships.

To do otherwise, we risk creating a marginalised, disaffected youth under-class which feels excluded from mainstream society, both in the city and elsewhere in the North-East.

Where we stand:

Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.

For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.

Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.