

Education, Education, Education: a quick fix solution to a long term problem. Can education solve social exclusion?

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1. Introduction

Exclusion from society takes many forms and may result from a plethora of causes. Social exclusion is not a new concept yet it is only since 1994 that it appeared on the European political agenda. The European Commission argued that successful social inclusion rested with the educational system.¹ The UK has embraced this notion believing that the attainment of an inclusive society rests primarily with education. This is based upon the belief that exclusion from the work place brings about exclusion from society as a whole. Further, it is argued that education brings down social and cultural barriers, opens up doors to new opportunities, and prepares the individual for the needs of today's workforce. The extent to which this is true is debatable. For it could equally be argued that an inclusion policy based upon education may raise expectations and thus prevent prospective employees from seeking employment that they perceive to be below their abilities, thus leading to voluntary exclusion from the workplace. This may be the case in the UK today. For, inclusion in Further and Higher Education has never been greater, yet unemployment still persists despite there being ample jobs available.

2 What is social exclusion?

There are many definitions that try to explain the phenomenon whereby people (or areas) are excluded from society voluntarily or otherwise. A simple definition is put forward by the UK Government. They describe social exclusion as

a shorthand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown ²

However, a person, or area, may suffer from several of these factors simultaneously for they are often linked and mutually reinforcing. An examination of who the socially excluded are, the factors that place them at risk of exclusion, and some of the unique cultural issues that exist within the UK today highlights that the problem is deep rooted within our society, and thus whilst education has a part to play, it cannot ultimately be held responsible for the success or otherwise of solving these problems.

3 Who are the socially excluded?

Social exclusion occurs when, amongst other things, “people are denied opportunities to work, to acquire the education and skills required for a modern economy”.³ This illustrating the UK Governments emphasis on the notion that if you provide employment opportunities you will reduce social exclusion. Further, the Beattie report emphasised the fact that young people not in any form of education, training or employment are at risk of social exclusion.⁴ He argued that low levels of literacy and numeracy were likely to lead to a lack of engagement with education and training and thus lead to social exclusion.

However not all social exclusion results from a lack of employment opportunities. The Cabinet Office points out that those most at risk of social exclusion are those on low incomes, those living with family conflict, those in or leaving care homes, those with school related problems, ex offenders, ethnic minorities, those living in deprived areas, those with mental health problems, the disabled, older people and teenage mothers.²

Nevertheless, it is not enough to merely identify who the excluded are, we must also ask what are they excluded from. For without the answer to this question the problem cannot be addressed. For a young offender excluded from employment because of his/her adverse reputation may be fully included within all other aspects of society, therefore to re-engage him/her in employment may be as simple as a government job creation scheme. However, a single parent with children under the age of five may be excluded from employment through lack of child care and thus may not be so easily re-engaged. This requires substantial investment into pre school nurseries. The lack of child care facilities leads to child poverty, poor housing and isolation. This dilemma is much more difficult to fix and often leads to long term problems. This is one of the major problems facing the UK today.

4 Measuring social exclusion

One of the great difficulties for researchers examining social exclusion is the lack of a universal method for calculating exclusion. This is evident through the lack of concise data on the subject. The Scottish Office and UK Government tend to use unemployment figures. However there is great danger in this for these figures are highly subjective and dependent on the method of calculating unemployment. For to be classed as unemployed within the UK one must be of working age, capable of working, actively seeking work, and registered as such (claimant unemployment). Whilst this measure is useful for many purposes by definition it may exclude many of the categories defined as socially excluded. It also ignores the growing numbers of people within the UK

who seek employment but fail to meet the criteria for benefits therefore not registered as unemployed. The Social Inclusion Unit therefore tends to use data on poverty levels and suggest that those on incomes below 60% of the national average wage are in danger of exclusion.² These differing methods of calculation, whilst useful, often result in very different figures and make it virtually impossible to accurately assess the numbers excluded from society. Indeed, the lack of a reliable public transport system has resulted in people being excluded from many aspects of society, including employment.⁵ Nevertheless, in the UK it is estimated that some 10% of the population are at high risk of being socially excluded with around 33.3% at risk at some point in their lives.² This shows a substantial increase from the 1997 figure which sat at 22%.³

5 Factors that might lead to social exclusion

As social exclusion is a problem facing all EU nations the European Council set about identifying factors that placed individual, groups, or geographical area at risk. These are; long-term unemployment, long-term low incomes, low quality employment, poor qualifications, leaving school early, growing up in a family vulnerable to social exclusion, disabilities, poor health, homelessness, immigrants, ethnic background, and racial discrimination.³ By identifying these groups within society governments hope that they can target those most at risk and in doing so eliminate/reduce social exclusion. Within Europe “employment is seen as a key means to social inclusion”.⁶ Indeed several of the risk factors are directly employment related, whereas the others could bring about unemployment indirectly if left unchecked.

6 Education and poverty

Education has long since been associated with the elimination of poverty within the UK. In Scotland for example, the poor laws of the 19th century embedded education at the core of policies aimed at alleviating poverty. Compulsory education until the age of 13 years was established in 1872 in recognition of the importance of this to both the individual and the economy. However, the rest of the UK was slightly later with universal education made compulsory for all in the mid 20th century.

It is without surprise therefore that today education is seen as ‘*a key means of preventing the risk of poverty and social exclusion and an important way of supporting the inclusion of the most vulnerable people*’.³ Indeed, it has been singled out by most EU governments to play a significant role in addressing the problem of social exclusion.^{3, 1} Governments, by targeting education, hope to achieve two things; increase social welfare and increase in economic growth. In doing so they argue that not only will the individual benefit but the nation (and Europe) as a whole. For most governments believe that poverty is the primary

cause of social exclusion and this in turn results from unemployment and/or low incomes. This is certainly true of the UK. For as the 'Skills for Life' report points out 26ml people of working age have an unacceptable level of literacy and numeracy⁷. Within a knowledge society the inability to perform at the higher levels of communication will undoubtedly result in poor employment prospects. The Scottish Office and the UK Government continually emphasise the need for education to focus on attracting people with few, or no qualifications back into learning. They argued the need for the removal of all barriers to education. Indeed, Jim Wallace, Scotland's Minister for Lifelong Learning, argued recently that "Scotland's continued economic growth depends on today's young people acquiring the skills they need for life and work".⁸ This quote, although directed at the Scottish economy echoes the sentiment of most European governments today.

The question is 'to what extent can education resolve these issues and are governments right in believing this to be the best way forward?' To answer this we need to examine the cause of current unemployment and low incomes and assess the extent to which education can assist.

7 An historical overview

In 1998 there were 10ml people within the UK living in relative poverty of which 2ml were children living in homes where no adult works.⁹ Today that figure is nearer 12ml (22% of the population).¹⁰ Most of these will be at risk of social exclusion. Therefore, despite the fact that so many people face poverty, it is child poverty that the current UK government aims to target. For research indicates that within the UK long term unemployment is seen as acceptable within family units. For, it is not uncommon for there to be 3rd and 4th generation of unemployed within a family. Children growing up without an employment role model are more likely to become unemployed themselves in later life. It is this cycle that the government hopes to break.

An examination of UK unemployment soon highlights where this problem stems from. The early 1980s, saw large scale down sizing, both in the public and private sectors resulting in the highest levels of unemployment since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The majority of those made unemployed were middle aged men with few or no qualifications. Many of these would never work again despite actively seeking employment. Tradesmen were also 'laid off'. The scale of unemployment was such that most people knew someone affected and claiming unemployment benefits. The result was that within the UK it was no longer 'shameful' to be on state benefits.

This had a dramatic knock on effect. For the young, particularly males, saw their elders for whom they held great respect, unable to obtain work resulting in a cultural shift away from education and training. What was the point? If their fathers couldn't find work what hope was there for

them? The effects of this mistaken belief are still prevalent within the UK today. Therefore, as the Work Foundation points out the UK is coming from a back position “Britain suffers from a legacy of low levels of basic skills for many workers, moderate educational achievement, and an incoherent and insufficiently valued skills and training and skills development system”⁷

To compound matters further, the UK has moved from a labour intensive, low skilled, economy of the mid 1960s to a high tech, knowledge economy requiring enhanced levels of education and training. Unfortunately because of this unemployment legacy many still see little or no advantage to participating in education and training therefore educational attainment has not kept abreast of these developments. Today almost 1/3rd of UK 19 year olds still lack basic qualifications and although we have seen unemployment rates fall since 1997 concern is still valid over the fact that young people under the age of 25 years are twice as likely to be unemployed.⁹

If we compare our position to that of the US, France or Germany the UK has the lowest proportion of its workforce qualified to level 2 or above (Standard grade/GCSEs or above). Recent figures show that ¼ of those aged 11, 16 and 19 (the years were academic ability is measured) fail to meet the basic level.⁹ Hutton, examining skills gaps found that the UK was 7th in English out of 47 countries measured and 18th in mathematics.⁷ For the 5th richest nation in the world these figures are not only alarming but unacceptable. Given the fact that the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s study into poverty in the UK found that those with few or no qualifications are at greater risk of receiving low incomes and thus as we have seen are at risk from exclusion this situation must be addressed.¹⁰ This is made worse by the fact that incomes for those in employment with few skills is lower today that it was in the mid 1970s.¹¹ Poverty and social exclusion go hand in hand.

But there is a greater cultural problem within the UK which leads to voluntary exclusion from employment. This problem stems from raised expectations resulting in a mistaken belief that an individual should not be expected to undertake certain types of employment i.e. menial tasks. This again finds its roots in the latter half of the 20th century. Job titles were changed to reflect an altering perception of us as individuals. Refuse collectors became know as sanitary ‘engineers’, salesmen referred to themselves as marketing ‘executives’. We became a nation of employment snobs. Neither the job specification nor the salary changed, but attitudes did with severe results. For this, coupled with the fact that wages in lower skilled occupations were not keeping abreast of inflation, but unemployment benefits were, resulted in a sector of society unwilling to undertake ‘menial’ jobs, but quite willing to take state benefits. Few other countries have experienced this problem to the same extent as the UK has, for although for example America has had similar problems,

their state benefit system is not seen as a 'right' but as a privilege open to possible abuse.

8 So what is the role of education?

The European Union recognises that one of the major challenges facing Europe is tackling the educationally disadvantaged.³ They also emphasises the need to rescue those who left school early by bringing them back into the educational system, enhance basic skills, increase lifelong learning, customise education and training, and making education accessible. Their 2001 report outlines 4 strategic policy approaches for social inclusion;

- 1 Early intervention to prevent educational disadvantage
- 2 Removing barriers to participation for vulnerable groups
- 3 Developing integrated responses to early school leavers
- 4 Promoting lifelong learning and adult literacy

As such, recent UK education policies have been designed to ensure that groups who are at greatest risk of becoming socially excluded are *enabled* (authors own emphasis) to participate in education and training.¹² Education has been very responsive to government policy initiatives, i.e. intervention to prevent early school leavers. There are a plethora of examples that could be used here; one being payments to those from poorer backgrounds to encourage them to remain in school longer, but recognising that the pattern of non attendance begins at an early age one school in Glasgow began a breakfast club. There is nothing new in this, but this school took this idea one step further – they invited parents to join in. Attendance increased immediately for whilst some parents were unwilling to bring their child to school for breakfast they were when there was something in it for them!

The Disability Discrimination Act has been implemented at all levels of education with a genuine desire to remove barriers to this vulnerable group.

The government also aims to change people's attitude to learning throughout life. To compete in today's working environment, they argue, employees must be willing to train and retrain as necessary. Further and Higher Education has adapted to meet this changing agenda through offering more part time provision, open access and distant learning provision.

However, the main thrust of government policies have been aimed at increasing participation in education at Further/Higher levels with the aim of reaching a 50% participation rate. Whilst this is still below that of many European countries it is deemed an achievable level (indeed this figure has already been exceeded in Scotland).

Therefore, whilst education has adapted and changed to meet these new demands and has been highly innovative in its approach, can it solve

the problem of social exclusion? This is a very difficult question to answer. For, it depends on the cause of the exclusion. If the source is unemployment through poor or inappropriate skills levels, then yes it can, but only if the recipient is willing to participate and believes they will be better off in doing so. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that most people associated a successful future as getting a job they enjoyed.¹⁶³ However, those interviewed did not feel that education was the means of achieving this, but was viewed as a means of increasing salaries *within* employment. This misconception may come from the fact that little work has been carried out to assess the economic benefits of education. Therefore, whilst education may improve the lot for those on low wages and thus reduce poverty induced exclusion it is not seen as a route out of unemployment by those unemployed.

The notion that education is only for the elite must also be challenged. Many youngsters still believe that education at the higher levels is only for those from middle and upper class backgrounds. As such many choose to study within Further Educational Colleges. Much has been done by Higher Education to overcome this problem but this stems from a cultural divide deep rooted within UK society and its class system which will take many years to overcome.

Another reason that many of those who have the potential to gain higher levels of education fail to do so is because they fear getting into debt. It has long been recognised that the poor are risk averse when it comes to debt. With the reduction/elimination of the grant aid system in recent years many feel that the long term benefits that might be gained from education do not out-weigh the debt burden that this will entail. As such many choose to either not engage in education at all, or to engage on a part time basis only (usually leaving before attaining their full potential). Here we have a dilemma. The government claims to want to increase participation for those who would not normally engage in higher education, but in removing these grants they in effect remove the ability for many to participate. Top up fees will only exasperate this matter further.

9 So where do we go from here?

Knowing who the socially excluded are and the factors that make them at risk has enabled education to identify and put in place measures to alleviate the problem for many and allow them to engage in an educational process (relatively) free from discrimination and bias. But many of the issues discussed in this paper that prevent engagement stem from deep rooted cultural beliefs and a perception that education will not provide sufficient additional benefits. To overcome these issues will require re-education, but not schooling as such. It will require a change of attitude to unemployment, to the right to benefits, and the notion that

we as a nation are above undertaking the menial tasks. Therefore, whilst education today is inclusive, exclusion will remain despite this.

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