



Policies and Programmes to Address Disadvantage among Young People: Issues for Evaluation

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This article discusses some of the issues facing young people experiencing disadvantage in the labour market and associated implications for evaluation of programmes to address disadvantage. Drawing on the experiences of an evaluation study undertaken in an English county, the article explores alternative approaches to evaluation and the need for additional indicators to accompany quantitative outputs such as numbers into training or employment. The article is structured as follows: introduction to issues facing young people in the labour market; comment on evaluation of social programmes; a case study example of a local evaluation study; and discussion of evaluation issues arising from the study.

KEYWORDS: disadvantage; evaluation; local economic development; training; young people

Introduction: The Youth Labour Market and Policy Changes

The labour market for young people and the processes by which they enter employment in the UK have changed radically since the early 1980s. Economic restructuring and a shift in employer demand towards higher qualifications and levels of skill for a range of occupations previously filled by relatively unqualified school leavers have led to a decline in employment opportunities for this group (Maguire and Maguire, 1997; Roberts, 1995). During the same time period, there has been a corresponding trend towards more young people remaining in full-time education beyond the age of 16. Between 1989 and 1994 the proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds in full-time education rose from 48 percent to 72 percent, although there are some differences in participation according to factors such as gender and social class (Payne, 1998). Changes in government policy in the early 1990s meant that most young people aged below 18 were no longer eligible for unemployment benefit (White and Smith, 1994). Despite the guarantee of a place in youth training, a significant proportion of young people leaving full-time education at the age of 16 have been without any job or place in education or government-sponsored training. Reasons for this may include the low levels of

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allowance for training, lack of opportunities in a preferred area of work and the perception of youth training as 'slave labour', that still prevails despite the rebranding of programmes for young people and attempts to improve the quality of such training (Pitcher and Green, 1999). Opportunities in the 'informal' labour market may provide greater short-term gains.

The proportion of young people not engaged in any full-time activity after compulsory schooling, a state often referred to as 'Status Zero', has been estimated at between one in seven and one in ten (MacDonald, 1998; Payne, 1998). For relatively short lengths of time (i.e. up to six months) the proportions can be much higher (Williamson, 1997). There is some likelihood that the education system now absorbs some young people who previously would not have been engaged in any full-time activity after age 16, although many of this group may drop out of further education at a later stage. It has been estimated that more than a third of young people starting a full-time college course at age 16 leave early or fail their course (Coles, 1995).

A wide range of programmes at national and local level has been aimed at disadvantaged and 'disaffected' young people, including the Youth Training Scheme, Youth Training/Youth Credits and the current New Deal for Young People. Those initiatives designed to address the non-participation of young people in the labour market have generally tended to be aimed at training and the ultimate goal of employment. Such programmes have usually been of a comparatively short-term nature and tended to have limited resources (Pearce and Hillman, 1998). They may assist those young people who are relatively 'job-ready': that is, those who may have experienced some problems entering the labour market (for example, due to relatively low levels of skills or qualifications), but who do not face significant barriers impacting on their lives over the longer term and may primarily need advice and guidance in issues such as job-search and 'employability'. These programmes, however, have been recognized as being less suitable for those experiencing more extreme disadvantage, such as homelessness, possession of a criminal record or problematic drug use, who need more sustained support directed towards their individual needs, in addition to training and advice (see for example, O'Connor et al., 1999). For these groups, labour market measures will need to be accompanied by other measures and 'embedded in a holistic approach, including elements of social assistance, guidance and counselling, training, childcare and so on' (Nicaise et al., 1995: 213).

Those young people experiencing multiple disadvantages are likely to require a multi-agency approach often not catered for in short-term measures. Some are likely to have dropped out of formal education through disillusionment with a system that they perceive as inflexible and unable to address their needs. Programmes that appear to replicate structures that have already been rejected are unlikely to attract or retain many young people in this position.

Programmes of a relatively short-term nature may potentially serve to add to disillusionment, through their inability to deal with the complexity of problems faced by young people in disadvantaged circumstances. Such short-term 'solutions' may raise expectations, while doing little to open opportunities in

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primary labour markets and may thus simply serve to compound disadvantage (MacDonald, 1998).

The New Deal for Young People is aimed at young people aged 18–24. Certain groups, such as lone parents, ex-offenders and people with literacy or numeracy difficulties are eligible to enter the programme before reaching six months of unemployment. The difference between the New Deal and earlier training schemes is that it offers a Gateway period, lasting up to four months, where an Employment Service adviser works with the young person in order to help them improve their employability. A feature of the New Deal is its emphasis on ongoing support and assistance. Despite many positive features compared with earlier programmes, however, the evidence shows that it has been less effective in offering the required support to more disadvantaged and vulnerable young people (Hasluck, 2000; Millar, 2000; Woodfield et al., 2000).

The Connexions Service currently being piloted has benefited from some of the lessons learned from the early stages of the New Deal, including recognition of the need for sustained one-to-one guidance and longer-term provision aimed at supporting disadvantaged or disaffected young people (*Connexions*, 1999). Nonetheless, in order to reach all of its target group, more innovative approaches such as detached work may be required (Johnston et al., 2000).

Evaluation of Social Programmes

The continued absence from any known mainstream activity of some 16- and 17-year-olds and the persistence of long-term unemployment and disengagement amongst certain groups in society point to the need for policy makers to develop a greater understanding of the issues leading to such exclusion and to evaluate and improve policy responses. While there has been a proliferation of initiatives in the UK designed to address unemployment and social exclusion, only more recently has the importance of evaluation, especially at the local level, come to be recognized more widely and resources committed to the process (Crighton, 1998; Storey, 1990; Turok, 1989). The complexity of problems faced by young people experiencing substantial disadvantage and the potential ambiguity of purpose in policy intervention raise questions for evaluation strategies.

The criteria for funding often mean that programmes at a local level have to be adjusted and tailored to meet these criteria, particularly that of preparation for employment (Piper and Piper, 1998). Some goals, such as addressing the specific barriers and problems experienced by clients, may thus be implicit, rather than specified as one of the objectives for funding purposes and may fail to be addressed in the sustained manner required.

Traditionally, particularly in its early stages in the UK, evaluation has been used to measure whether and how a project meets its objectives. This alone can be a limited and narrow goal and may not in itself be sufficient to analyse the operation of, and potential problems faced by, social projects, taking into account the wider socio-economic context. An effective evaluation needs also to unpack the appropriateness of programme objectives, barriers to achieving these, the relationship between the programme under evaluation and other initiatives in the

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same labour market, as well as identifying means of improving project delivery. It can also have the practical role of early notification to programme managers of problems, to enable corrective action to be taken (Clarke, 1999).

It is important also in evaluation to explore the extent of the project's apparent success in meeting its objectives or achieving positive outputs and the reasons for outcomes. 'Success' may come about by accident rather than intent and may mask a need for improvements in procedures and processes; an ostensibly 'unsuccessful' project may be operating on misplaced or unrealistic criteria, with important outputs and outcomes currently being ignored.

Models of evaluation, particularly those in the UK in the early 1990s, have often focused on issues such as efficiency, economy, effectiveness and accountability of organizations (Everitt and Hardiker, 1996). Such models, which derive from performance measurement, often claim to adopt a 'scientific' approach to evaluation, which presupposes the existence of certain 'facts' that can be assessed objectively. This form of evaluation tends to centre on defined inputs and measurable outputs/outcomes, with an assumption that causal relationships may be found between inputs and outputs. Means of assessing these indicators have primarily been quantitative, for instance through the use of large-scale surveys, often linked to administrative data.

Although a more evidence-based approach to evaluation has been adopted in many contexts in the UK in recent years, some evaluations still place greater emphasis on the quantitative aspects, rather than giving equal worth to qualitative methods.

In the case of the type of programmes under discussion here, a largely quantitative approach is unlikely to get to the root of the problems and barriers experienced by the client group, nor will it reveal alternative means of assessing client progress in addition to the stated objectives of the programme. In any labour market area, there are often a number of initiatives operating at the same time, sometimes with similar aims or aspects and it may also, therefore, be problematic ascribing cause of change to any one intervention in isolation. Qualitative research and evaluation techniques will facilitate an understanding of the different processes in operation.

Many projects working with young people also employ strategies outside formal programme structures to engage hard-to-reach groups and these may require alternative techniques of evaluation in order to gather evidence from clients.

Case Study of an Evaluation: The Youth Life Chances Programme

An evaluation study of a local programme aimed at young people who had been out of the labour market for some time and who experienced considerable disadvantage was undertaken over a period of eight months during 1997 and 1998 by researchers at the University of Warwick (Pitcher et al., 1998).¹ The purpose of the study was also to design an evaluation strategy that could be carried forward by local agencies over the longer term. The overall Youth Life Chances

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programme, which was led by a partnership involving a local authority, a Training and Enterprise Council (TEC) and a Careers Service company, aimed to enable disadvantaged young people to 'maximize their contribution to, and share in, economic prosperity and social well-being'. It involved a number of schemes dealing with specific groups of young people, such as ex-offenders, disabled young people and those from minority ethnic communities. The programme had been established under Single Regeneration Budget funding, prior to the introduction of the New Deal programmes and a further purpose of the evaluation was to ascertain the degree of overlap with other programmes and the possibilities for integration.²

There were some important variations in labour market experience between local areas in the county where the programme was based. For example, although the overall unemployment rate in the county was lower than the national average, at the micro-level some wards experienced relative deprivation, with unemployment levels being much higher than those for the county as a whole, particularly for young people aged 18–24. There are indications that it is especially difficult to be deprived in an otherwise affluent area, partly because of a relative lack of support and provision compared with areas where deprivation is more extensive and partly because of the psychological effects of comparative lack of success.

The Youth Life Chances evaluation study aimed to assess the extent to which individual projects achieved their declared aims, but also to explore the perceptions of all parties, the operation of projects and activities and difficulties faced by the clients in greater depth. One of the objectives of the study was to arrive at a set of indicators of progress, taking into account the unstated aims and processes of the project and the experiences of the different stakeholders. The operation of the individual projects was also set in the context of the wider local labour market and the networks of partnerships in which the projects operated.

Three pilot schemes within the overall programme for young people were evaluated in depth and a framework for evaluation was designed which could be applied more widely and potentially by different agents. The three projects all catered for disadvantaged young people in the county, but each had a specific focus. One project aimed to provide disadvantaged or disaffected unemployed young people with intensive help in developing their job-search skills and to help clients obtain and retain suitable employment and training opportunities. It operated on a one-to-one basis and incorporated outreach activities to facilitate contact with young people who were particularly difficult to reach and engage. The aim of the second project was to develop opportunities for young people for whom there was currently no provision, particularly those with learning difficulties, physical disabilities or with emotional or behavioural difficulties, who had left full-time education. The final project was a finite 10-week group programme designed to prepare young unemployed people for the experiences of an adult working environment. The other two projects had no fixed timescale. The measures employed by the projects were primarily 'supply-side', although relationships with employers were also being developed as a further aspect of the programme. While each project differed from the others in terms of structure and

type of activities, the focus of all was on enabling young people to make informed choices, rather than imposing particular options.

Many of the young people participating in the projects faced considerable barriers to entry into training or employment and may have been profoundly discouraged through prior experience from attempting to enter 'mainstream' activities. Part of the evaluation involved developing an understanding of the processes leading to such disadvantage and arriving at an acceptable set of indicators, in addition to those relating to the ultimate goals of the programme, through which policy evaluators might judge the relative success of the projects.

Methodology for the Study

A case study approach to the evaluation was adopted. This allowed outcomes to be viewed in the context of internal processes and also external influences both on the operation of individual projects and also the experience and actions of the young people participating.

A common feature of many evaluation studies, particularly in the evaluation of large programmes, has been the use of different interventions applied to control and experimental groups that are considered to have common characteristics, in order that differences in outputs may be measured. It is arguable that the use of supposedly 'scientific' measures in social science studies is generally problematic, not least because it is difficult to ensure the coverage of all variables which may have a bearing on causal relations, but also because of the problems disentangling the multiple factors in order to establish cause and effect. In the case of this study, because of the nature of the client group, all of whom experienced different forms of disadvantage, with some having multiple disadvantages, a control-group approach would not have been appropriate. Firstly, there were problems of access to the young people. (The projects endeavoured to engage all young people in the district who were long-term unemployed and not participating in formal education or training. Thus any young person not involved in some way would have been extremely difficult to contact and, if contactable, quite possibly reluctant to participate in the study.) Secondly, it is questionable whether it would have been possible to find two sets of identical circumstances and attempt to measure causality in such a situation. With the diversity of the young people concerned and the multiple disadvantages and problems experienced in many cases, it would be extremely difficult to unpack the contributory factors to disadvantage and to be confident that like was being compared with like.

It was considered important to ensure that all views were heard and that any outcomes were viewed in the context of the particular labour market and the barriers faced by the young people participating in the programmes, as well as the scale of the opportunities available to them. It was thus necessary to obtain an in-depth picture of the processes involved and to consider outcomes in the context of factors likely to impact on them. The sponsors were also keen to explore the difficulties faced by project managers and workers and their perceptions regarding problems meeting current funding-related outputs.

Initial discussions with stakeholders, partners and project managers set the

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parameters for evaluation and enabled relevant statistical and other contextual information to be collected – including that relating to the local labour market and data collected on a regular basis for different funders – prior to exploration of issues in greater depth with managers, staff and clients of the projects. A framework for evaluation was drawn up following the initial discussions and consultation with individuals.

A series of semi-structured interviews was undertaken with project managers, project staff, clients, key agencies and other stakeholders. The questions for *managers* covered issues such as recruitment and marketing processes of the projects, the activities of the projects, barriers to progress, funding, monitoring, feedback procedures and referrals and follow-up. For *staff* within the project, the main areas for discussion included assessment of the project operation, perceptions of the client group and the role of staff and the support they received. The questions for the *young people* themselves were designed to explore their personal characteristics, such as experience and skills, factors and barriers affecting their participation in education, training, employment and society generally and their experience of the project.

The interview schedules for *key agencies* and *stakeholders* aimed to establish their role in the local economy and their perceptions of the role and desired outcomes of the projects. Information was also sought on the availability of local labour-market indicators. Respondents were also asked for their perceptions of the current situation for young people within the county and the impact of the programme on the wider economy.

The framework was designed to assess not only whether current objectives were met, but the rationale for those objectives, whether they were realistic, how the activities of the projects reflected the actual needs not only of stakeholders but also clients, how they fit in with the activities of other agencies in the county and the extent to which it was feasible to set alternative or additional indicators that were measurable or meaningful to all parties. The evaluation also attempted to ensure as far as possible that no one perspective was privileged over another, although the views of participants in the projects had to be balanced against the requirements of sponsors or potential sponsors of the projects.

Consideration of the most appropriate means of gaining access to and conducting interviews with clients raised important research questions, particularly in relation to who should be permitted to be present at interviews. A purist stance might maintain that including project workers in interviews with clients may lead to ‘tainting’ of the research. On the other hand, young people in a position of disadvantage may be reluctant to discuss issues openly with an unknown researcher from outside, whom they have no reason to trust. It was decided that where possible, individual interviews would be held with the young people on their own, after the purposes of the evaluation had been explained to them by project workers and their permission sought. In many cases, young people were willing to talk to us about their experiences, but it was found to be helpful to have project workers present in one focus group, where young people had not previously been brought together and were particularly reticent, having had little experience of their views being sought and listened to by ‘professionals’ (other

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than their project workers). The workers, who had built up a relationship with them over a period of time, were able to encourage them to participate. This structure also enabled some observation of the dynamics of interaction between the young people and their project workers and this can also be an important aspect of evaluation (Clarke, 1999). Ideally, over time it would have been possible to build up trust with these clients and to see them independently at a later stage, but this was not possible given the timescale of the study. This raises an important point for evaluation of such programmes: in many cases, sufficient time is needed to build up some relationship of trust with participants, especially when asking them about very personal information. The evaluator also has an ethical responsibility, when conducting research of this nature, to ensure that some form of support is offered (if required) to interviewees subsequent to undertaking an interview which may raise or resurrect distressing issues.³

During the course of the evaluation, researchers spent some time within the projects, which enabled some observation to take place of interaction between project staff and also between project workers and clients. Had the evaluation period been longer, more extensive participant or non-participant observation would have been of benefit, in order to situate the data collected and also to assess the ways in which project workers and managers chose to present themselves and their data. In some cases in evaluation studies, observation may be an essential component, particularly where interviews may not be possible for some reason (Clarke, 1999).

In the evaluation project undertaken, evidence was gathered from the various partners and stakeholders in the programme, in order to capture understandings of the objectives and activities of the programme and the wider socio-economic context. The framework which had been agreed following the initial discussions set the initial structure for analysis. Building on initial data gathered, where certain common issues or views arose that appeared to require further consideration, these were explored in greater depth in follow-up interviews. Issues raised during the interviews and initial findings of the research at particular stages were presented to partners and stakeholders through a series of seminars. It was important to get the views of partners and stakeholders on the early findings in order to benefit from their experience of the local labour market and knowledge of the wider impact of the programme and barriers to successful implementation. The seminars also formed an additional forum for wider consultation and for group dialogue on policies and practice, with the opportunity to discuss and attempt to resolve differing perspectives and priorities, with results fed back into the process of evaluation. While the perspectives of clients/users of the services were gathered earlier through individual and group interviews, they were not themselves present at the seminars and thus their interests were represented by practitioners. Had there been sufficient time during the course of the evaluation, a seminar to feed back findings to the young people and to gather their views would ideally have been the next step. Part of the evaluation focused on whether both formal and informal mechanisms were in place within the projects for feedback from and to clients and such feedback forms an important ongoing means of gaining the views of users on the service they receive.

Development of 'Alternative' Indicators

The activities of projects in the Youth Life Chances programme were dictated to some extent by their declared aims, but involved a far wider range of work. This involved not only preparing young people for employment, but also helping to provide them with essential life skills, which they may not have possessed to any great extent, or which they had to relearn. Many young people arriving at a project, for example, had no experience or knowledge of concepts such as making and keeping appointments, or how to relate to others. Many had immense difficulties trusting those in an official setting because of earlier experiences of being failed by others. Project workers often needed to provide advice on benefits, literacy training, housing, contraception and healthcare, in addition to the advice and guidance on training and job-search activities, considered to be the primary focus of their role. They were also required at times to chase up or find funding for courses, examination fees, books, etc. It was estimated by one project manager that around 80 percent of staff time was spent in preparing young people for guidance and only the final 20 percent on actually helping clients with training and job search.

Many of the young people interviewed had very low self-esteem and confidence. For example, a history of abuse and problems with figures of authority could create great barriers for the young person in approaching agencies offering support. Some respondents needed support from their project workers for more than six months when undertaking activities and might need to participate in voluntary activities for some time in order to gain experience and confidence. These young people were still a long way from being ready to enter mainstream employment in an unsupported environment, despite the desire in many cases to be ready to work.

Some young people had a history of offending and generally experienced severe problems in finding employers willing to take them on. For some, voluntary work was an interim option that enabled them to increase their self-confidence, as well as demonstrating their reliability to potential employers. Voluntary work was also problematic in some cases, however, due to the nature of the offence or the type of work the young person wished to pursue. In the case of working with children, for example, restrictions often applied, so it was very hard for young people with an offending background to gain experience in this field. This was likely to increase disaffection with the system and with the ability of agencies to offer meaningful assistance.

Project managers and staff raised certain other issues, which impacted upon the operation and outcomes of projects. Where targets are not met, the reason may be because of the way in which they have been set, which may not take into account all the important 'milestones' during the progress of a young person before they become 'job-ready'. It is argued that such key stages, which form a vital part of the projects' training activities, need to be built into monitoring and evaluation processes and recognized as valid targets. They include basic life skills such as accepting the need to modify behaviour, trusting the project workers, building up confidence and being able to cope with problems alone. For some of

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the clients, employment may not be a desirable goal and evaluation needs to take into account other important forms of development in their own right, such as participation in social and leisure activities, as well as the life skills discussed earlier.

Many of the client group, because of their chaotic lifestyle and the nature of their disadvantages (including, for example, drug or alcohol problems) may 'drop out' of the project temporarily with no means of being contacted, only to return at a later date when the immediate problems have been dealt with. Such early exits may have no relation to the activities of the project and thus might not be regarded as 'failure', but rather 'deferred outcomes', although for purposes of evaluation it may be necessary to set a time limit for return to the project.

The evaluation thus aimed to identify indicators (see Box 1) in addition to the more obvious outputs of employment and training, which would capture the different stages of development of each individual participant.

Such outcomes, which are as important as those that might generally be adopted in an evaluation focusing on declared aims and goals, are more difficult to measure than easily visible quantifiable outputs. It is possible to find means of assessing progress in these areas, however, through a rigorous approach to qualitative data collection and analysis. Possible approaches to assessing client progress are discussed below.

In order to facilitate the measurement of such 'proxy' outcomes, a data collection tool was developed, in discussion with managers and staff in the projects. This aimed to collect basic information relating to each young person referred to the project, incorporating the data requirements of different funders where relevant (for example, data collected for projects assisted by European Social Fund included the number of contact hours with clients: this was expanded to explicate the amount of time spent by project workers on different tasks related to each case); but also questions relating to the assessment by project workers of different aspects of progress according to the indicators discussed above. Over the timescale of the evaluation, it was not possible for the researchers to explore longer-term implementation and effectiveness of the questionnaire. Project staff and managers were encouraged to monitor and develop its use on an ongoing basis for their own critical practice.

Box 1. Examples of Indicators Arrived at During the Interviews and Discussions

- Returning to the project after the first visit;
 - asking for advice;
 - accepting and acting on advice;
 - making a decision for oneself;
 - increase in self-confidence;
 - undertaking day-to-day activities alone;
 - participating in voluntary work;
 - accessing leisure or social activities;
- in addition to more widely recognized employment or training-related outcomes.

Issues Raised by the Youth Life Chances Evaluation Study

One of the important findings from the evaluation was that there is a constant tension between doing the work, often with limited resources, and the need to keep records for funding statistics and evaluation, which may create competing priorities. Finding sources of funding is a constant issue, because funding tends to be short-term and often consists of a number of small sums from different sources, rather than one large grant. This means that managers may have to cope with different criteria, monitoring statistics required and timescales, which can be very time-consuming and needs to be built into costings for administration of projects.

The short-term nature of much funding also impacts on the potential for long-term planning and security of project staff. In some cases, staff did not know if they would receive further funding until nearly a week before the current funding was due to expire. The insecurity created by the situation (which is one that has become increasingly common for many projects) also has consequences for the clients, who are likely to feel that their future with the project is uncertain, despite endeavours by project staff to create an atmosphere of support. There is a need for funders and other partners to consider the potential sustainability of such projects, in order to create a more stable support framework for both staff and clients. The importance of continuity of individuals also needs to be recognized: clients tend to build up a relationship of trust with particular staff members and if staff turnover is frequent this is likely to be detrimental to the work with young people.

It is important to understand the barriers faced by disadvantaged young people and the fact that progress to overcome these can be slow. In the case of young people with a prison record, for example, who may often experience multiple disadvantages and are likely to lack confidence, there is a need to build up trust: both the individual's trust in agencies offering support and agencies' and employers' trust in the individual. This is likely to take a significant amount of time and may involve gaining confidence through voluntary work initially while the young person is given continuing support. In traditional measurement of outcomes, this stage may not be counted as a funding-related output, although it should be seen as a significant step in terms of individual development. This also has implications for the time element in evaluation, in that progress and potential outcomes can only be measured over a longer period in such instances.

In cases such as the individual projects evaluated, the researchers recognized a need to demonstrate incremental or alternative measures of success, in order to contextualize statistics of training or employment, which do not give the complete picture. Individual case studies, giving examples of how far a young person has to travel in order to succeed, can be useful enhancements (see Box 2). Staff in one of the projects evaluated were already engaged in preparing case study examples of participating individuals, as a means of demonstrating to funders and referring agencies the work of the project and its impact on young people's lives. These case studies not only reflected the 'successes' of the project, but also instances where the young person's problems, or external influences or

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pressures, were such that the project was unable to make a significant impact on his or her life at that stage.

Such case studies can be incorporated in the evaluation, not only as illustrative material, but also to demonstrate the varying circumstances of clients, issues impacting on their progress and the range of timescales for development.

It is important that alternative indicators of progress give some evidence of the time project workers spend in activities that are not directly concerned with training or preparation for employment. These may include accompanying clients on visits to the doctor, helping with advice on housing or outreach work, which is particularly important as a means of contacting the client group and publicizing the work of the project. For example, some project workers became involved in church groups and setting up a group for young mothers: activities which may not always be seen as directly related to project activities, but which may be vital in establishing credibility among the local community and with young people who are potential users of the service.

One of the issues uncovered during this and similar evaluations is the difficulty of disentangling different influences on project outcomes and the behaviour of participants. Particular positive outcomes, for example, may be in part due to the presence of a dynamic and respected project manager and attitudes of staff. Personalities, as much as the systems in place, play an important part in determining the behaviour and reactions of clients. Such issues can only be unpacked through in-depth exploration of the multiple factors impinging on individual development.

The evaluation study also found that supply-side measures alone are not sufficient when tackling the issue of reintegration and employability of disadvantaged young people. There is a need simultaneously to work with employers in order to engage support and to give the chance for young people to gain work experience and begin to establish a CV. Given the workload of individual project workers, it may be that such work can be undertaken outside individual projects, through inter-agency partnerships, while ensuring that contact is maintained with project managers and workers.

The framework of partnership and inter-agency collaboration within which such projects operate and possible overlapping jurisdictions are also important

Box 2. Possible Contents of Personal Case Studies

- A brief description of the personal history and problems faced by each young person
- His/her attitudes to the project and interaction with project staff
- Activities undertaken and progress with the project (including qualifications gained or embarked upon)
- Changes to personal circumstances
- Personal development while on the project (observed or reported by the client)
- The impact of external influences or pressures
- Reasons for leaving the project (if the young person left earlier than anticipated)
- Subsequent activities and development.

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considerations, as are effective links between agencies, both to enable progression and also to 'track' the progress of young people leaving projects. It is important to attempt to do this over the longer term, because of the changes taking place in the young person's life and the likelihood that some young people will go through the 'revolving door' of alternate cycles of unemployment and employment which may often be of a casual or low-paid nature (Jordan, 1998; Roberts, 1998). Their employment status may be picked up as a successful output in the short term, despite the fact that their circumstances may keep changing over a longer period of time. Equally, other young people who do not enter employment or training immediately on leaving a programme may take longer to benefit from the programme and thus their longer-term progress is important in evaluating the impact of the advice and support they have received. In the case of a younger client group in particular, lifestyle changes will also influence future activities. A 'snapshot' evaluation does not pick up changes in circumstance and any delayed impacts of the programme. Keeping track of participants over the longer term is no easy task: issues arise such as the degree to which local agencies are willing to co-operate with one another, the need to maintain individual confidentiality and the extent to which individuals wish to be traced. Building up co-operation between organizations may be a lengthy process and relationships of trust may often be more likely to be established at the level of contact between individual project workers.

Lessons for Evaluation

As was argued earlier many evaluation studies in the UK have in the past tended to give primary focus to quantitative measurements and a scientific (positivist) approach. Positivist models of evaluation tend to employ certain key concepts in defining criteria of measurement, such as notions of deadweight, additionality, substitution and displacement. Although more recent evaluations have begun to incorporate a wider range of approaches, including qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, enabling greater exploration of context, process and individual perceptions of programme activities and development, the qualitative approach still tends to play a secondary role in comparison with the quantitative aspects of evaluation. Evaluation studies are often commissioned by policy makers, who may see an outcome-driven, largely quantitative approach as one enabling them to make decisions about the future of a programme through demonstration of whether it 'works'.

Evaluation based on the positivist model, particularly if confined to measuring how, or the extent to which, a project's goal are reached, will not necessarily pick up the need for interim goals or the inappropriateness of stated goals for some clients. Those who do not complete a training programme or who leave a project while the evaluation is taking place, as in the case of the Youth Life Chances study, may simply be counted as 'drop-out'.

The potential 'goal trap' in some evaluation models is an issue which has been identified as problematic by some commentators (e.g. Meyers, 1981). An example of this could be searching for goals which do not exist, or imposing unrealistic

goals on projects. The result could be that measures imposed on the project or programme become ends in themselves and distort the programme. The dangers of imposing inappropriate goals on labour market programmes are also highlighted by Nicaise et al. (1995). For example, poor outcomes may in part be attributed to inappropriate activities, as in the case of mismatches between schemes and the actual needs and capabilities of disadvantaged participants such as long-term unemployed job seekers. In the case of the Youth Life Chances programme, the explicit longer-term aims of employment or enrolment on a training programme were not realizable for all participants equally, particularly in the short term. An important aspect of the evaluation was endeavouring to capture the varied levels of individual development along a continuum in order to demonstrate the range of project activities and the impact of the project outside its declared goals.

'Success' in many approaches to project-level evaluation in the UK has tended to be defined largely in terms of positive outcomes, often quantified as the proportion of the target group going into employment or full-time education and training. Such an approach tends to assume a degree of homogeneity in the target group (Fletcher, 1997). Outcomes such as these, while being appropriate in certain circumstances, may only give part of the picture, or a distorted picture, in the case of programmes dealing with disadvantage. For some groups in the population, for example, disabled people, young people who have dropped out of formal education with no qualifications, ex-offenders and others with particular disadvantages, such outcomes may be a much longer-term goal and each individual may be at a different starting point. Evaluation research studies based on the positivist model may not facilitate any deeper understanding of the processes leading to and maintaining disadvantage, including the differential early educational and other experiences of individual young people, which impact upon their perceptions, attitudes and readiness for the labour market. The attitudes of funders, project managers and workers towards the client group may also impact on the way in which the young people perceive themselves and this could influence outcomes.

The degree to which young people leaving a project are able to gain employment or enter further training may not necessarily, or entirely, reflect on the extent to which the project has prepared those young people for the labour market, but may also be a result of the actions of external bodies. The potential for preconceptions and prejudice on the part of employers and training organizations and other external factors impinging on outcomes also need to be given consideration. For example, young people in possession of a criminal record are likely to be much harder to place, because of the stigma attached to offenders and the failure on the part of many to believe that circumstances and behaviour may change (Apex Trust, 1991; Thatcher, 1997).

While it is important to recognize that documented goals may not reflect or accommodate those actually pursued in practice, it has also been argued that the identification and setting of goals are still an important part of the evaluation process (Peled and Spiro, 1998). Evaluation may assist in developing more realistic goals for projects, although it is important to recognize that goals and targets

may change over time and with changing circumstances, such as external labour market developments. It is necessary to reassess these goals on a regular basis to ensure that a programme has sufficient flexibility to accommodate change.

Alternative Approaches to Evaluation

Critics of the positivist, outcome-focused approach have argued that evaluation research studies based on these models, particularly those adopting a quasi-experimental design, fail to incorporate context and hence may leave out crucial issues of relevance (e.g. Everitt and Hardiker, 1996; Guba and Lincoln, 1998). The meanings and purpose attached by human beings to their activities and behaviour tend to be ignored. The assumption is often that an 'objective' standpoint can be attained through the traditional positivist model. Theorists arguing from a perspective of alternative paradigms (such as constructivism or interpretivism, which place emphasis on exploring the experiences of individuals) assert that so-called 'facts' are value-laden and that theories and 'facts' are inter-dependent (Guba and Lincoln, 1998).

A premise of such approaches is that the social world is fundamentally different from the physical and natural worlds, in that it consists of individuals with subjective understandings and in diverse circumstances. Data should not be viewed as external facts and truths that can be checked and understood in isolation from their context.

Researchers and theorists are not gods, but men and women living in certain eras, immersed in certain societies, subject to current ideas and ideologies, and so forth. Hence as conditions change at any level of the conditional matrix, this affects the validity of theories – that is, their relation to contemporary social reality. (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 171)

The view of those arguing from interpretivist or constructivist standpoints is that multiple perspectives of all actors involved must be sought as part of the research process (e.g. Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The voices and views of powerless and 'at risk' audiences are considered to deserve equal consideration with those of other, more powerful audiences, as well as that of the inquirer (Guba and Lincoln, 1998). These perspectives are incorporated in emerging theory and interpreted by the researcher/evaluator. Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that the researcher has an obligation to feed back ('give back') what she/he has learned and present reasons for interpretation of material.

Theoretical approaches to evaluation such as constructivism or interpretivism reject the notion of objectivity and freedom from values in evaluation and focus instead on processes, meaning and understanding, rather than causal explanations. Such arguments have played an important part in challenging the dominant discourse, particularly in highlighting the importance of consulting a range of stakeholders when conducting an evaluation. From some points of view, however, an interpretivist account may be seen as too relativistic in its approach to evaluation, providing no clear analysis of the operation of a project and thus no direction for policy makers (e.g. Pawson and Tilley, 1997). This approach has

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also been criticized for failing to take account of 'the structures and processes through which subjectivities are shaped and maintained' (Everitt and Hardiker, 1996: 98): that is, that power relations, interests and values should be recognized explicitly in their wider context.

When evaluating social programmes that deal with disadvantage, it is important to pay attention to different understandings of the purpose and operation of projects and locate them in relation to differences such as social class, gender and race. Sensitivity to these issues is likely to impact on the evaluator's perspective and the relative weight given to each of them (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Client Input into Evaluation Studies

The value of stakeholder contributions to evaluation is now a more widely acknowledged aspect of evaluation theory, such as in utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 1997). In more recent years, the concept of stakeholder has been widened to incorporate the perspectives of clients.

A question to raise at this stage is 'who determines the level of progress made by individual project participants?'. Is it the evaluator, the manager of a programme, or the client him/herself? While it has now become an acceptable (and in some instances, essential) part of the process to include interviews with clients or customers, it is not always clear what is the role or function of this aspect in the overall evaluation process.

It has been argued (Valentine et al., 1998) that research conducted with or about young people generally has not served to empower or enfranchise the young people themselves and researchers or evaluators need to consider the ethics as well as the practicalities of the process.

Gathering the views of clients of programmes, particularly those of client groups such as that in the Youth Life Chances study, may be more problematic than research with other stakeholders. For example, a self-completion questionnaire format may be less effective, particularly in cases where clients have problems of literacy. If the questionnaire is to be administered by others, this raises the question of who is most appropriate to do so. For example, it may be practical to enlist the help of project workers, but if the purpose of the questionnaire is to gather views on the project, this method may bias responses. Respondents to the questionnaire are likely to be a self-selecting sample, with those young people who are more difficult to reach and engage being less likely to complete a questionnaire and thus such an approach might be in danger of being perceived as tokenistic.

Some form of entry and exit questionnaire, based on self-assessment, may help to indicate individual development over time and the contribution of the project to that development. Attention should be paid to the language in which such a questionnaire is formulated and also who is most appropriate to administer the questions. It is easy to arrive at differences in interpretation or 'semantic breakdown' (Deutscher, 1977). Valentine et al. (1998) point to the different 'maps of meaning' which shape youth sub-cultures, as well as differing geographical and racial identities, all of which need to be taken into consideration when assessing

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the processes involved. In addition, the relationship of power that the interviewer has with the respondent may influence the response. It is also important to note in relation to questionnaires on personal issues such as perceptions of self-esteem that responses may be influenced by immediate but transient external circumstances. For example, if a young person is experiencing particular problems outside the remit of the project on the day when the questionnaire is administered, their self-perceptions might be more negative.

It is not suggested that a questionnaire to users of the kind discussed above be used as the sole means of gauging the effectiveness of a programme from a client perspective, as responses may be limited by using pre-set questions and young people should be able also to provide feedback in their own words, through other means, such as in-depth interviews. As part of the process of learning developed by one of the participating projects, young people were encouraged to describe their experience of and feelings about the project in their own terms. Work such as this, produced by clients themselves, is important as evidence in an evaluation, and not simply as illustration. In addition to the individual case studies prepared by project staff, participants in the project were also encouraged to develop their own 'case studies' outlining their perceptions of their progress since participating in the project, their aspirations and what they felt was needed in order to move closer to or achieve their goals, whether in terms of support from project workers or specific work experience or training needed. Many were happy to give their permission for the evaluators to see these. One young person's view of the project in which he was engaged was that it 'helps young people to cope with how to get a job, training and advice in a way that's comfortable for them'. Young people had also described their early life experiences and their perceptions of the project in poetry form.

While it has become more common in evaluation studies to include some form of consultation with clients of projects and programmes, they are rarely seen as clients of the evaluation itself, with a view to express on the findings (Killeen, 1996). Project participants can not only have an important input into the process but may often present an alternative perspective or raise issues not considered elsewhere in the evaluation.

In order for the evaluation to be usable by all stakeholders, the report and other dissemination of the findings should be accessible to a range of users, including the client groups of the programme.

Practicalities of Project-level Evaluation: Gathering Evidence and Making Judgements

While an evaluator may start out with a 'toolkit' of methods and evidence to be gathered, the method(s) to be used in evaluations will ultimately be selected according to the context of the research and practical considerations, which may often take precedence (Clarke, 1999). For example, the optimum data to be collected for the evaluation need to be weighed against time constraints for project workers and the extent to which they are able to devote their efforts to gathering data of the required quality. Very often evaluators have to work with

imperfect or incomplete data and lack of consistency in data collection and they need to be flexible and responsive to competing demands on project workers. Thus it is even more important in programme or project evaluations to incorporate a range of approaches to data collection.

... given the nature of the evaluation enterprise, there are no fixed rules for producing the perfect multi-method evaluation research design strategy. Evaluators often work under practical constraints, which means that in making methods choices they are compelled to consider such factors as the size of the research budget, the time available in which to complete the evaluation and the potential certain methods have for disrupting programme activities. There are also ethical and political considerations to contend with: these too have implications for methods choices. (Clarke, 1999: 89–90)

If the evaluation imposes new requirements on projects, or leads to a revision of data collection or systems of data storage, it is important also to build in a realistic time frame for changes to project systems.

It is argued earlier that in gathering data for evaluation, all parties should be enabled to have a voice in the process, through means that are most appropriate for each group. It should be recognized that the evaluator also has a great deal of power in deciding which stakeholders to include in an evaluation and the final sample will have some influence on the findings. The method of selection needs careful consideration and justification (for example, are interviewees recommended by project workers and funders, in which case how can the 'gaps' be identified?). In many cases, the sample of interviewees may be determined by availability and willingness of people to talk to the evaluators, in which case this also needs to be made clear in any discussion on evaluation processes.

While it is important in evaluation to explore differing perspectives, in practice it may be problematic to represent the interests of all parties equally (Cheetham et al., 1998). At the end of the process, the evaluator generally has to interpret and weigh up evidence that at times may be contradictory. In order for an evaluation to be of use to funders and policy makers, the evaluator's judgement is required, drawing on lessons learned from the process and where necessary making recommendations to modify or change the direction of the project or programme. At the same time, the evaluation process should be made as transparent as possible in order to make clear how the evaluator arrived at those judgements.

Conclusion

The specific evaluation exercise outlined here demonstrates that projects aimed at addressing disadvantage may not be framed in a way that reflects the nature or extent of that disadvantage. For example, outputs may relate to final stages without taking into account the time it may take to reach these stages, or the important steps in between, and in some cases initial outputs may not reflect steps which may be taken at a later stage, but which may be connected with the activities of the project. Projects such as the ones described here are likely to be more intensive and demanding of resources than more mainstream programmes. Inclusion of the indicators discussed earlier may present the project in a very different

light, especially when demonstrating its successes or barriers to progress, than if the project is judged simply in terms of final outcomes.

An effective evaluation of the type of projects described here needs to set the projects in the context in which they operate, uncover process issues and develop greater understanding of the factors contributing to and maintaining disadvantage for the client groups. It is argued that qualitative approaches, as described earlier, enable evaluators to explore these issues in the depth required, particularly when gathering evidence from clients.

This is not to suggest, however, that quantitative methods should be rejected in their entirety. One of the purposes of evaluation is, after all, to provide evidence to funders that projects are in some way meeting their objectives and have made progress on issues and the provision of data on client progress is an important aspect of evaluation. Ideally, evaluation should generate both quantitative and qualitative data and analyse them as such, taking into account the different views of all participants and presenting information in a way that is accessible to all those with a potential interest in the findings. At the same time, to avoid the trap of relativism, the evaluator should attempt to theorize differences in understanding and make values explicit, while using judgement to inform policy development.

Different methods of research and data collection and analysis have strengths and weaknesses in particular contexts and triangulation in evaluation research attempts not only to 'plug the gaps' inherent in each method, but also to strive towards verification through constant comparison. While it is now more common to use a mix of methods in programme evaluation research, the question remains as to which approach is given primacy and when. The fixation on 'numbers' may often be in response to the expectations of funders. If progress is to be made in setting up projects that meet the needs of more disadvantaged members of society and build on lessons from existing programmes rather than trying yet another 'new' approach, it is important to continue to challenge the perceived primacy of the quantitative ('hard') method of evaluation and work towards a methodology which seeks to unpack the processes maintaining disadvantage.

None of these debates is particularly new, but it is necessary to continue making the argument in relation to evaluation of programmes taking place in the UK, where there is often continued emphasis on quantitative and experimental approaches to research and the belief that quantitative techniques are able to provide 'objectivity', whereas qualitative methods are inherently 'subjective' and therefore less valid.

In reality, the conduct of an evaluation depends largely on the data that can be made available and the willingness of staff and other individuals to participate in the research. Evaluations at project level need to be negotiated carefully, in order to arrive at a realistic solution to data gathering. Some projects have become more 'socialized' in the process of systematic data collection than others and have built it into their work programme, often through the need to seek funding from various sources to maintain their work. When evaluation research can demonstrate the effectiveness of a project or programme and provide examples of 'good practice', particularly through feeding back findings to practitioners and policy

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makers, this can in turn lead project managers and staff to view evaluation as of benefit and thus be more willing to set aside time to provide relevant data.

In conclusion, there are several lessons to be learnt for evaluation from the Youth Life Chances study. Firstly, a holistic approach enables assessment of a more comprehensive set of indicators than is incorporated in a positivist model of evaluation and allows for re-assessment of the criteria on which a programme operates. Secondly, exploring and endeavouring to understand the differing experiences of young people themselves help to set the indicators in context and to reflect the fact that progress may be variable according to individual circumstances and background. Thirdly, evaluation over the longer term, particularly that employing qualitative methods, may pick up some of the reasons why individual young people drop out of programmes and whether they return at a later stage. Fourthly, involving all the participants in the initial evaluation process helps to build capacity at project level and set in place longer-term mechanisms that can be adopted by project managers and workers themselves.

Finally, evaluation should be seen not as a 'one-off' exercise, but as a continuing process, which enables programmes to evolve and respond to experience, in the context of a changing labour market with a changing need for policy intervention.

Notes

The author would like to thank John Pryor of Hertfordshire County Council and Anne Green of the Institute for Employment Research, University of Warwick, for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

1. Institute for Employment Research and Local Government Centre. For a full account of the research see Pitcher et al., 1998.
2. Single Regeneration Budget funding has been the principal source of Government support for local area regeneration between 1995 and 2001, with an emphasis on a partnership-led approach.
3. The impact on the researcher of interviewing young people in disadvantaged circumstances may also need to be considered, with some form of 'debriefing' built into the process.

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