

Catching the Learning:

A case study of a youth and community project

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Abstract

In this thesis I set out to explore the process of learning through building a case study of a small youth and community project working in an area with high indices of need. For young people moving through adolescence to adulthood, learning can be a long, complex and delicate process.

Using a participatory and ethnographic approach I set out to explore the processes of learning within the project and to build a case study of a small youth and community project. This has involved working with the project over a four year period, attending and being involved in meetings, events and the day-to-day life at the project. I also undertook semi-structured and unstructured interviews and focus group discussions with young people, staff and members of the local community.

Through the process of the research, four key themes emerged; experiences and perspectives on informal and formal learning, concepts of community, intergenerational learning, and developing identities through transitions to work. At the heart of the research is an exploration of the nature of learning itself: for many of the people involved, formal school learning has been problematic. However the more informal approach used at the project considered in this thesis, appears to have been able to engage them far more effectively in the learning process.

My findings suggests that an educational approach, where informal learning and reflection are central, may prove more effective in enabling young people to develop the confidence and transferable skills to cope with and contribute to their communities. It also suggests that most people see the most valuable and effective learning environments as being responsive and flexible; enabling opportunities for intergenerational learning and exchanges; and providing a range of positive and challenging opportunities designed to build practical skills, self esteem, and confidence, and to explore attitudes to work and community.

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Preface

In this thesis I set out to explore the process of learning through building a case study of a small youth and community project. I have divided the thesis into two sections: the first covers the research process, as well as an explanation and detailed description of the case study and individuals' involved in the research, whilst the second focuses on analysis through literature reviews and theoretical analysis of the data. I divided the thesis into two separate parts to distinguish between the research process and background work involved in constructing the case itself, and its relevance to theory and literature. This will allow me to look at the practical and physical case before making a detailed analysis through deeper theoretical observations using the research collected.

I view the research process that I initiated as one which is dynamic, reflective and has an impact on practice. I have drawn on observations, documents, and interviews and on the knowledge I have gained through participating in the life of the Project as it has developed over the last four years.

My research has influenced the Project by contributing to; the development of resources and activities for young people to explore attitudes to work; case studies of the stories of the people involved in the project to encapsulate some of the key messages for training and demonstrating impact and further developing peer mentoring and support; as well as ongoing support to strengthen the mechanisms for ensuring that the feedback from the young people's group, and the community group, inform changes to practice. It has also provided the stimulus for discussion around development of national policy on young people I was contacted to discuss my research approach and the emerging findings and I have provided information for these documents¹.

¹ (LGA 2009 a , LGA 2009 b, LGA 2009 c) *Following on from this, a representative of the project was asked both to attend a round table discussion, and collectively we were asked to comment on the document and proposals as they developed.*

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Section One

Making the Case

In this, the first section, I begin to construct the case; this commences in Chapter One with a description of the Project, how it started and developed, the geographical features and an introduction of some of the characters involved. In Chapter Two I explore what is meant by the term 'youth' and a brief overview of the policy context around learning provision for young people. In Chapter Three I provide a sample of the stories of the young people and community members who have been involved in the Project. In the concluding chapter to Section One I set out the methodology and proposal, explore the changes that have occurred through the process of the research and discuss ethical considerations.

Chapter 1

The beginning of the story

In this chapter I give a detailed description of the personal process that I went through in developing the Project from the very beginning. This includes describing the community, local area, building and people involved, as well as talking about how the aims of the Project developed over time and the challenges and achievements this brought with it. This description aims to give the reader a feeling for the Project itself. In concluding the chapter I also address how and in what way the Project became the focus for this thesis and the questions I hope to address through my research and analysis of the Project.

The Project: The first viewing

We had been talking about the idea of a youth project, something to meet the needs of young people who were not immediately ready to go to college, training or work and who needed time to gain skills and knowledge in a safe environment. My husband, Paul, was working for the local council at the time, in a project supporting care leavers entering into employment or training, and although sometimes this was successful, more often than not, the young person would only persevere for a short time. His experience was that often the young people needed more time to test and try out different opportunities.

It was a bright autumnal Sunday as I turned on my computer to research the cheapest properties in the area. The first one listed was an old builder's yard. I skimmed through a few others but it was this barn-like, black building with ship-lap timbers, which caught my eye, and was reasonably priced. We set off in the car for the initial reconnoitre and found it tucked behind houses, accessed by two alleyways, one a dead end and the other running along a street of houses. We parked in the road and walked towards it.

Our first view was of a black imposing structure, battered and unkempt through years of neglect and surrounded by a brick wall. Facing up the alleyway to the street was a large old corrugated gate, painted black, but closed. Next to it, was a wall containing a large hole, a make-shift entrance which people had evidently exploited for some time. We climbed through the gap and encountered a yard strewn with rubbish, which had evidently served as a dumping ground for many years. The building stood open, forlorn and ransacked, with rubbish heaped up, layers and layers of old paint tins, toys, beds, chairs and plastic bags of dog mess. In the wall leading to the cut off alleyway was a small door, still hanging, but open.

It was impossible to gauge the extent of the site, which was overgrown with ferns atop

the rubbish. To the left was a single, brick skin outbuilding with windows, and attached to the end was an additional lean-to, full of old tiles and wood. To the right was an open lean-to with a corrugated roof. We clambered over some of the rubbish but it was still difficult to get to the back. The main building was on the right as you enter the yard, the main structure being brick below, with a curved wall as it joined the alleyway. Attached to the end of the building was another lean-to building made of wood, which contained an armchair and lots of spilt paint. This room was clearly being used by children as a den, and they had been playing out some kind of story.

The building had two openings, with tall, and what were originally sturdy wooden doors, standing open and battered, and half hanging off their hinges. Going through the first door we found a shelved room with the remains of the builder's materials strewn across the space. There were tins of paint, mouldings for cornices, and all types of wood. We had to pick our way across the floor to where a wooden ladder led to the first floor through a small hole in the ceiling. Entering through the second door we found, straight ahead, a flight of old wooden stairs battered, but solid. On the left, the space under the stairs had racks for wood and in another partitioned off room, children had been playing. There were the remnants of a fire and some burnt timbers, two armchairs and an old fireplace, which they had arranged like a theatre set.

Climbing the stairs we found the left hand space open with a wooden floor, broken pool table and wood and rubbish everywhere. There were also more remnants of the builder's materials with more moulds for cornices and a wooden rack ran along one wall. The end wall, which was made of wood ship-lap, was broken in places making it possible to see through to the outside. There were also some windows overlooking the site. At the opposite end there was another large space with an opening out towards the yard, clearly used for unloading materials from the top floor to the ground. The whole place despite being overgrown, full of rubbish and dilapidated had a calm feeling, perhaps it is the boundary walls, but there was an unusual sense of quiet in the middle of this heavily built up area.

Establishing the organisation

Once the building and land had been bought, we began to try to make it secure, by putting up wire around the top of the walls and beginning to clear some of the rubbish. Using an old pick-up truck we sorted through the rubbish. Often we would find the alleyways had more rubbish dumped in them or people had thrown it over the walls into the yard, proving it was still seen as a dumping ground by local inhabitants.

We began slowly meeting people and making contacts but were careful not to worry residents with our ideas for the place. On one occasion we met a young man who asked what we were doing. He lived in one of the houses backing onto the building and we reassured him that we were only making it secure. He turned out to have a positive attitude to young people, knew children had been using it and was aware that they needed somewhere to go. We were concerned that residents would be wary of a youth project in their back-yard but he was more concerned for the young people and their safety, rather than as a potential risk to the neighbourhood.

Once, we encountered some young people in their early teens, two girls and two boys, who may well have been the ones who had been using the site as a playground, trying to climb over the wall into the yard. We talked to them about what we were trying to achieve and what our hopes were for the community. They said they wanted somewhere to go, to play pool, and particularly somewhere where adults wouldn't tell them what to do; somewhere they could make choices for themselves.

Another time there was a large group of children; most of them were about 6-7 years old, with one or two a few years older. They clearly knew the layout quite well, from the questions they posed about the building, for example asking if the ladder was still there to get up to the second floor. They all insisted that they had never been in the building, and it was others they knew who had.

Over the year we cleared some of the outside and inside of the building and repaired

the doors etc. at the same time as we were exploring how to set up a charity or social enterprise. It was at this point that we decided to set it up as a Community Interest Company (CIC) so that the project could earn money, which would go back into running the project itself. In this way we hoped to work towards it eventually becoming self sufficient or at least partially sufficient. A lot of time was spent preparing documents, having meetings, talking and planning, and eventually the CIC was formed.

The first year of operating

The Project was given some funding which was used to pay James to work at the Project for a year, part time. Paul worked on a voluntary basis with him to get it established; working with a few young people for the two days a week it was open. Over the first year the building and site were cleared, an area for bricklaying was concreted and a portable office was brought on site as a tea room, office and meeting room. There were no services, so water and hot drinks had to be brought in, and a temporary toilet was established. But amazingly the young people who came worked well in the basic conditions. In the meantime we were applying for grants and managed to secure funding for buying the building and renovating it, which included some funding for staffing.

Returning to the Project as a researcher: three years on

It is a cold bright Saturday morning in March 2009. Paul and I have breakfast, load some car boot items into the back of the little van and head off towards the Project for a bring and buy sale and an opportunity for people to see the new community room; a conservatory and kitchen. The event has been planned by a local resident, Louise, whose garden runs along the bottom of the project. Paul has spent all week getting the

place cleaned up so that it is in a reasonable condition for people to look around and come to the event. The paving along the edge of the building has not been finished, so he has built some steps out of wooden pallets and boards. To get to the Project we have to cross a bridge and the traffic can get snarled up easily when it is out of action. To the left is the old quayside, mostly demolished and lying empty. Beyond are the old terraced houses and a few old warehouses some of which stand empty and broken. At one time some of these must have been impressive, and the architecture harks back to a more prosperous era; the dilapidation a reminder of the poverty in the area today.

Situating the Case

The town has struggled with low employment, little industry and low investment. It was once a thriving fishing port but for many years this has declined and what tourism there is has not replaced the lost employment. Now, the industry there once was, has mostly closed down. The prospects for employment are very limited, mainly seasonal and part time work. Recently there has been an influx of Portuguese workers and their families, but the town is fairly mono-cultural; white working class.

The population of the town in which the Project is situated in is approximately 65,000 and the population of the district is 126,742. The overall percentage of the population in employment across the district in 2010 was 77%. However the town has some of the most deprived wards in the county and the percentage of young people 16-18 not in employment, education or training in the town is currently 13.33%.

There are several wards in the town which fall within the 10% and 20% of those with greatest deprivation. The ward where the Project is situated is one of these. The local area is one of the oldest parts of the town and there are families living there who have been in the area for several generations. 22% of the population in the ward are aged between 16-29 years in contrast to 14 % across the district in this age band. (County

Observatory 2010 accessed 8.07.2011).

Looking out of the car window while driving to the project, the sense of poverty and lack of hope and ill health, hangs in the air. The road bends left as it goes past the railway station derelict land to the left, and to the right, run-down houses. We take a right turn and here the houses are smaller, more packed together. We pass two pubs, either end of the road, which look empty and unused. We turn left after a sharp bend and along this road are identical terraced houses. The Project is nestled in behind these at the end of the gardens on the right. The building is invisible from this angle; we turn right again and reverse down a narrow alleyway which leads to the Project.

It is at this point that you first see the building, slightly to the right. It stands in its own piece of land, bounded by brick walls. Just inside the gate is an open space and the new metal fence gates stand open, having been unlocked by the first people to arrive to be ready for the community car-boot sale. The building is set back to the right, with off-white boarding at the top, like an old wooden building. At the bottom the first coat of render, with lines scratched in, on top of mesh, waits for the finishing coat and paint. On the gate post at the entrance, a small sign saying 'Table top sale' has been stuck to guide people in.

The bottom of the building is rough and the curb has not yet been laid, leaving about four feet of unfinished ground leading up to the building. There are two entrances in the main building, with double white wooden doors on each. The first set is closed but in the second set, the first door stands open. Further down the building, a new block work conservatory building has large plastic and glass doors which stand open. Looking down at the end against the left hand wall is the semicircle of a plastic poly tunnel. One of the doors is open and Greg, a local retired man who volunteers at the Project, is tending his plants. He looks up and waves. The whole place has a sense of purpose, waiting for the workforce to arrive. Louise has placed bins and other obstacles across, to stop people from going further than the community building. She and Julie, who is there to support the event today, have set out a few tables ready for the table-top sale.

Paul is greeted with, 'Well, I don't think much of your clearing up,' as we unload our car boot gear and put it on the tables, then there is the offer of a cup of tea or coffee. Chairs have been arranged around the room, and a table, with cups and tea and coffee set out between the two rooms. In the end wall of the conservatory is a wooden door which opens out into the alleyway outside. This is a newly made entrance and will enable people to access the community part of the building directly without having to come in through the main gate.

When we arrive we are told a lot of people have already arrived so we quickly unload our items for sale. As we start laying out our items Phil, Louise's son says, 'Now reinforcements have arrived I'm off' and leaves. Naomi, Louise's daughter, and Charlie her husband, are in the community room and make us a drink.

Eleanor, the gardener's wife, appears in the community room. She is smartly dressed, with a silk scarf; she sits and we talk briefly about the Project. Eleanor says how much Greg loves coming to the Project every day of the week. It has changed his life. We watch as Paul and Greg talk about the brick weave, they talk and gesture, Paul asking questions and their body language intent listening and a great deal of respect towards each other. She talks about how Greg's involvement with the Project has given him opportunities to communicate with other people and a real sense of his skills being valued.

The Project: exploring the aims and policy directions

The aims of the Project were to provide opportunities for young people aged 16-24 not engaged in education, employment or training (NEET) to develop and learn new skills in a real work situation. These young people would come on a voluntary basis and would be involved in all the processes and decision making to shape the Project. It was the process not the product which was important. Even if the building did not actually get

finished; as long as some young people had engaged and gained something, then that was enough.

The initial focus was to transform the building into a training centre for young people and a resource centre for the local community. Ideas for the Project are still developing and being shaped. The local community have been involved in a range of ways, as advocates, as volunteers, running and supporting community events, as well as having work on their front gardens done by the young people at the Project. Over the first two years the Project worked with approximately 60 young people. There have been successes with some of the young people moving into further training, employment or self employment. However, there have also been some, who, for different reasons have found it harder to commit themselves. For the most part referrals to the Project have come either directly from the young people, through the Youth Offending team, Connexions, schools, families and hostels for the homeless.

The model of support the Project offers emerged as it has developed. There has tended to be a core group of about 6-8 young people, split into two groups who come to the project for a year, usually two days a week. The small number of participants has meant that the Project staff can work almost on a one to one basis with them, building a working relationship with each young person. It enables very clear role models and support to be established to provide the opportunities for the conversations to take place which structure learning and reflection. These young people come as volunteers and there is no obligation for them to attend.

Alongside the core group the Project has also run short motivational courses for other individuals. For example it ran a twelve week programme for young people at risk of being NEET. This was the first time that young people were required to attend. This tested the original philosophy of the Project which was based on personal choice and independence for the young people. It made the staff involved discuss the dangers of taking on work which takes the Project away from its original aims, without fully considering the consequences for the young people involved, for the staff and for the

Project as a whole.

The Project has reached points where the original vision starts to be altered, without clear decisions being made, mainly because of the pressures of funding and other practical considerations. The Project is small, and sometimes the informal discussions between one or two people can result in ideas being implemented without a wider decision being made. The idea for this research came at a time when the Project staff felt the need to refocus, to be clear about what it was achieving, what it wanted to achieve and what needed to change. I discussed the proposal with the staff and some of the young people and they were keen to participate in my research.

Researching the Project

I chose to research the Project to try to gain insight into the process of learning, in particular for young people who had not previously engaged with learning and to support the Project's development. Also I believed that researching a small, voluntary sector organisation working at a very local level would provide information which could be relevant to other organisations with similar projects. Being personally involved would provide me with insider access and I would be able to gather a richness of data that might not have been possible from another organisation.

Having been involved in the Project from the start, I have been able to see some of the ways in which it has been evolving and changing, how some of the decisions are made, together with the tensions, frustrations and successes. I have been aware of the swings of emotions and inconsistencies, as well as the incredible drive and dedication of everyone involved. I have seen the way in which young people have become involved, some fully engaged and some remaining on the periphery. I have seen how members of the community have slowly got involved and how different personalities and interactions emerge and bring with them changes to the dynamics. I have helped at

many different events, supported training, developed publicity, helped with applications for funding, and organised project accounts. I have taken part in many debates about the ethics of who has the right to feel they can contribute to a community or 'help' young people. I chose to research this project because it offered an opportunity to look at the first stages of its development. The Project is an organisation that is fairly typical of other small, local voluntary sector organisations, which start in response to a perceived need in the community. Researching this project would enable me to explore the processes and the project drawing on my experiences and roles.

It is from my 'insider' position that the questions for my research have slowly taken shape. Some of the most difficult aspects to capture of any process are the changes and the small shifts in thinking, behaving and verbalising which build into broader learning outcomes. While the Project was set up as a training organisation, it emerged from a background of youth and community work with an emphasis on informal learning. One of the original plans was to develop a relevant and flexible curriculum with embedded literacy and numeracy skills. This was discussed as the Project developed, but there has also been some reluctance to tie it down to a more formal structure. This in part has come from reluctance to be too tied to evidencing progress, and a desire to allow things to emerge, learning from the organic process rather than formalising a structure of education. For many of the young people a formal structure was what had turned them off from learning in the first place. I decided to focus on people's perceptions of the changes that occurred for them through being involved in the Project, trying to see how people define what the process has meant for them and what, if anything, they have gained or changed, as a result of being involved.

My research aims and questions

In this section I address the aims of my research on the Project and focus on the key

questions that I hoped to address through this. The overarching focus of my research is to understand the processes of learning related to the Project, a small youth and community project in the United Kingdom. I decided to explore how the people involved in the project; young people, staff, members of the local community and myself as a researcher, perceive how the project affects them and others. I wanted to look at how and why learning takes place; how those involved and others have changed; how the project has changed; and also explore what people feel are the major motivators and barriers to young people engaging in work, employment, and training.

I initially developed the following key research questions:

- What do staff, volunteers, young people and members of the local community perceive as the changes for themselves, since being involved in the Project?
- What do staff, volunteers, young people and members of the local community perceive as the changes for other people involved in the project and for the local community?
- How has their involvement with the Project changed over time?
- How do they perceive the Project has changed since it was established?
- What are the influences/triggers for the young people involved in the Project that help them to engage with and move towards the responsibilities of training and work?

However, throughout the long process of collecting information and analysing my findings I realised that often the answers to these questions cannot always be clearly distinguished, as they relate to individual perceptions and development. My research became broader and encompassed these questions but with more flexibility to accept that there might not necessarily be a distinctive and conclusive answer to all of them. Part of this realisation was an acknowledgement that my research process needed to involve participant contribution and a high level of participation from those involved in the research.

My research design and methods

My research was influenced by both ethnographic and participatory approaches. I decided to draw on a case study approach; developing thick description, collecting data through informal interviews, conversations and observations. I also drew on participatory and action orientated approaches through my role as activist, insider and facilitator within the project. I worked with the staff, young people and the local community involved in and around the Project, to identify what the perceived effects of the Project were, for the people involved. I also explored what the young people involved see as the main motivators and barriers for them to take up employment, training, work and to take on a professional identity. I decided to build up a case study of the Project which forms part of its ongoing development and can provide useful insights relevant to other similar projects.

I planned that, as the data from the research was collected, I would explore with participants how it could be anonymised and used, possibly as narratives, to further explore and discuss the research questions. The research involved a range of methods including; interviews with staff, young people, and members of the local community; observations of meetings, events and work in progress, and would lead to the construction of a case study of the project. To ensure that the voice of everyone taking part was heard I planned to use a range of tools to stimulate discussion around the research questions and I asked staff involved to keep research diaries of their observations and thoughts on the process. I started by working with the staff team and directors to explore their visions of the project, the key research questions and to identify actions that could be taken to improve practice. As the findings emerged, I shared them with the participants so that they could reflect and contribute further to the research, as well as make changes and ensure their voice was clearly represented.

I have looked at literature on informal and formal learning; community; work with the NEET group; intergenerational learning and professional identity as well as other examples of youth and community projects and how participants are included and enabled to have a voice. I also interviewed young people who have already been through the Project, both those who have moved on to other opportunities, and those who have not.

Using semi-structured interviews has given an opportunity to draw out views, feelings and experiences about peoples' involvement in the Project. As I had an active role in the first stages of the project, I decided that it was important to draw on and use my experience and relationships within the Project and community to gather data from an insider perspective. I have been able to observe from first-hand the complexity and multi-dimensional nature of the research setting, helping me gain an understanding of the interactions, actions and some insights into people's beliefs.

I have kept field notes, which gave an opportunity to make notes of reflections and impressions from observations, interviews and other informal conversations with those involved in the Project. These have formed part of a reflective journal which I have kept throughout the research project and has involved aspects of a life history approach. Using a range of research methods, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, observations and an ethnographic approach has helped draw together the data and to crystallise findings to build a case study. It has also contributed to the development of the project itself. One of the benefits of developing a case study is that it makes it possible to really look at relationships and processes; focusing on one project enabled me to look in greater detail at the complexities of the social situations and interactions that are taking place. I felt it was important to look both at research literature and the policy linked to young people, learning and employment to really explore the context of the Project.

In Chapter 5 I describe in more detail my research journey, the methods and the ethical issues.

Chapter 2

In this chapter I frame the Project in the wider policy context as I feel it is important to explore the extent to which policy decisions affect the Project management and development of aims and related processes. I begin by exploring how local, regional and national policies on youth training and education affected the Project set-up and organisation, as well as the effect of recent policy changes. I will then go on to look at some of the terminology used throughout much of this policy, focussing on the words 'youth' and 'NEET'. I conclude the chapter by looking at the policy shift towards a focus on youth participation in decision making processes.

The Project from a policy perspective

I have decided to begin by looking at the Project through a policy perspective. The Project was established at a time when government policies were requiring Local Authorities to look at multi- agency working and to work much more in partnership with voluntary sector organisations to ensure the best outcomes for children (Cabinet Office 2007). During the time I have been undertaking the research there has been a change in government, and the Coalition Government elected in May 2010 has propelled local authorities to look at outsourcing most of their services and provision through its concept of the 'Big Society'. There is even greater emphasis on localism and services being delivered by the third sector. This move means that many small voluntary organisations may find themselves being asked to take on greater responsibilities and workloads. I would envisage that this will mean that many small organisations could find themselves being required to offer services that they were not originally set up to do; and this might well lead to mission drift and a blurring of their initial project aims.

This policy shift from statutory to voluntary provision could mean that the two sectors become less clearly defined. Already the requirements for voluntary organisations to get contracts for some of the outsourced work are leading to change in the practice of

organisations. For example the Project has been commissioned to undertake some work with pre-apprentices as part of a larger consortium and has had to follow the systems compatible with the larger organisations.

Through my research and analysis of this Project I hope to explore how policy and requirements for funding compare to the needs of young people within the organisation. I am interested to explore the extent to which these relate or contradict one another and how this impacts on project decisions and choices that directly affect the young people involved. Before moving on to look at this, however, I feel it is important to look in more detail at some of the terms used within this policy and address the usefulness and meaning given to these.

Exploring policy terminology: Understanding 'Youth'

In this section I will address the term 'youth', how it is defined in various different ways, how useful it is to generalise and make assumptions about specific groups and when and in what ways it may be useful to label in this way. I felt it was important to look first at what we mean by the term 'youth' in popular policy and academic discourses. It is often used to mean the stage of transition from child to adulthood, from anybody between the ages of 13-25. 'Youth' is often seen through a deficit model rather than a wealth model, where 'youths' are seen almost as misfits, between childhood and adulthood, a stage which needs to be got through or survived (Wyn and White 1997). This focus on the difficulty of the transition between adolescence and adulthood has been used as an argument to provide a wide range of interventions for young people often based on a deficit model:

'Youth is consequently constructed as a make or break developmental stage, thereby justifying the high levels of intervention within the lives of many young people.' (Heath et al. 2009:7-8).

A lot of the early research up to the 1980s focussed on youth transitions and the difficulties of employment, often using large scale population data sets. More recently there has been greater emphasis on using narrative, biographical and qualitative longitudinal approaches. Henderson et al. (2006) undertook a longitudinal study of young people which involved gathering in depth biographical data. The importance of looking at young people and their development, not in isolation, but in the broader social, economic and historical contexts has increasingly been recognised (Holloway and Valentine 2000). James et al. (1998) argue that age is a social construct 'rather than natural variable in research' (James et al. 1998:175). Similarly Solberg (1996) emphasises the importance for research to look at the contexts in which children and young people operate and focus on those interactions and what they do as active participants. Harden et al. (2000) explore the way in which different contexts, where people are often brought together in specific age bands, for example schools and youth clubs can influence behaviour amongst those groups, which in turn influences the assumptions we make about behaviour in those groups.

For me these studies have highlighted the importance of exploring youth and transition not in isolation, but situated in the wider context and have influenced my choice of methodology. The transition to adulthood is complex, and can be problematic, but focussing on a deficit rather than wealth model can provide a narrow and sometimes false picture; where young people are not seen as active participants.

The economic, social and personal effects of unemployment on young peoples' lives have been identified in numerous studies, although perhaps more notably in research by the Prince's Trust (2007); and Bell and Blanchflower (2009). Whilst there have been many initiatives which have aimed specifically at getting young people into work, the success of these schemes has been a subject of much contention (Atkinson 1999; Hales et al. 2000; Feinstein et al 2005; Maguire et al. 2008; Pring et al. 2009; Knight et al. 2010). The Nuffield Review (Hayward et al. 2008) Engaging Youth Enquiry highlighted the complexities of supporting young people to sustain work or training. Castella

(2008) identifies the importance of real partnership working and targeting of interventions as being important in reducing numbers of young people not in education or training and Barnardos (2008) identifies the potential disadvantages of some programmes for those from low income families and argue for a flexibility of provision to meet the wide range of needs of young people. Throughout my research many of the young people identified the importance and the difficulties of moving into real work situations, moving off benefits and gaining the skills, experience and confidence required to take up employment. I also came across some issues in relation to the term 'NEET', which I would like to explore in the following section.

Exploring policy terminology: Understanding what is meant by NEET

In this section I will explore the other key term used in much of the policy around this subject; NEET. I will look at various definitions of the term, how this label affects those categorised within it and to what extent it plays a useful role in grouping young people. I will also explore my own feelings about the term, the variety of needs within this group and how policy has adapted to meet this variety.

The more recent term I want to explore is 'NEET' which is now used in policy, research and popular discourse mainly referring to young people aged between 16 and 18 who are "Not in Employment, Education, or Training" (Social Exclusion Unit 1999). The joint Centre for Social Justice and Local Government Association documents 'Hidden Talents I, II and III (Centre for Social Justice 2009a)' highlight why this term is unhelpful; firstly because it 'depersonalises the individuals and their predicament;' secondly because using the label implies 'a full understanding of common problems and causes' and thirdly it uses 'the language of failure' (Centre for Social Justice 2009). Clearly this suggests various issues that arise from categorising these young people in this way.

As well as reinforcing a deficit model, the term NEET also tends to put all young people

in one category, masking the actual complexity of the situation, and creating a stereotypical group. The real issue is much more complex and there are many different reasons why young people may be out of education, employment or training (Pearce and Hillman 1998; Rennison et al. 2005). Reasons for falling into the NEET category include caring for a child or relative, having a disability, living in a particular geographic location, or simply lacking opportunities. There are high numbers of young people classified as NEET who have found the formal education system problematic, they may have a record of truancy or exclusion from school and have left school with poor educational qualifications. Many come from families where their parents have few or no qualifications and/ or are unemployed (Rennison et al. 2005). Each of these individual situations clearly carries with it different issues and challenges resulting in a wide range of needs.

The National Foundation for Education Research (NFER 2009) has identified three distinct categories of NEET young people in terms of their attitudes to learning; those who are positive about learning and may well engage in education or training; those who have personal and structural barriers, for example lack of transport, funding, no relevant provision or support, they were found to be more likely to remain NEET; and those who were simply not satisfied with the provision on offer (National Foundation for Educational Research 2009).

Using the term 'NEET', I believe, is not useful, as it categorises young people rather than identifying their specific issues and needs. These different groups of young people clearly have different needs, for some it appears as if being 'NEET' is a passing stage, for others it is linked to wider issues. Clearly the path to training and employment for young people, particularly those with low skills and unsupported by families and communities is complex and difficult.

There have been some steps towards an awareness of this variety of needs, the recent shift in focus to a model of apprenticeships and more recently, pre-apprenticeships would provide some young people with opportunities to explore the world of work

through practical engagement. This move towards the practical application of learning follows on from Lord Leitch's Review of Skills (2006) which recommended a significant increase in apprenticeships to provide practical, on-the-job training, as a way of enabling young people to prepare for the work environment. The administering body, The National Apprenticeship Service, was established in 2008 to provide a central information source for those interested, employers and potential employees or apprentices, but the demand for apprenticeships is likely to exceed the number available. The Wolf Report (2011) supports the move towards apprenticeships and criticises vocational provision which does not help young people move towards real opportunities or employment. The report highlights the need for programmes for those who would often fall into the 'NEET' group to focus on core English and Maths skills and work experience. It also recommends that funding and performance measures for programmes for this group should focus more on 'employment outcomes rather than on the accrual of qualifications' (Wolf 2011:14). From my own research of the Project I have seen some of the benefits of providing educational links to employment opportunities.

One of these links is providing young people with the opportunity to have autonomy over the learning and training process by making decisions for themselves and choosing the direction they want to go in. This is something I would like to explore in the following section.

Choices and decision making

In this section I would like to explore the importance of young people having an active role in the learning process and some of the theories about the role of young people in decision making processes. I will conclude this section by identifying some of the areas related to this that I would like to explore as part of my research.

The importance of young people taking an active part and seeing their role in the decision making process has been identified in research (New Perspectives for Learning - Briefing Paper 51 2004; Spielhofer et al. 2009). The research found that participation of young people in learning was most successful when: a project was flexible and could adapt to meet the individual needs of young people; there was a relationship of trust with project workers; where young people came on a voluntary basis; where activities were relevant; where the learning and training were presented in a non-formal way; where the young people were involved in decision making and they were responsible for their own learning; where there was respect and recognition for their choices and aspirations; and where they had the opportunity to reflect on their learning. However, the report suggested that it was a minority of projects which were successful in helping young people achieve both 'hard' outcomes (qualifications, jobs etc) and 'soft' skills. Often such projects, and in particular the most innovative and participatory ones, struggled to maintain sufficient resources to ensure continuity or sustainability.

Hajer and Wagenaar (2003) argue that it is important that policy making needs to shift away from being viewed as the collection of 'objective evidence' to a process that involves people through active participation, decision making and solving problems collectively.

This review of policy focused research in the area of youth training and NEETs has highlighted some areas that I believe are useful for framing my research. These include; the complexity of the transition from adolescence to adulthood; the wider context of the family; learning across generations and community; the importance of young people's active engagement and involvement in decision making; and of flexible, relevant learning opportunities which can respond to meet the needs of young people.

In the next chapter, I will return to the Project to continue to build up a holistic picture of the case. This will address and go beyond some of the policy categories such as NEET reviewed here and look in detail at individual experiences of learning and education generally

Chapter 3

Building the case: meeting the people

Introduction

In this chapter I am going to introduce some of the stories of the young people and members of the local community involved in the Project as a way of exploring some of the emerging themes. This information has been drawn from interviews, field notes of meetings, discussions with project workers and participant observation. In the construction of the text I draw at times on my different identities; as project worker, researcher and from a policy perspective.

I will begin the chapter by giving an overview of the people involved in the project during the period of the research and rationale for choices of interviewees. I will then go on to provide a more detailed impression of four different young people involved in the Project, constructing their stories using their own words provided through interviews. I will follow this by identifying some of the different perspectives that these stories provide on education. I will then provide a description of the location of the Project and the local community, before providing more detailed stories of three community volunteers involved in the Project. Following these stories I will explore some of the common themes that connect these three people as well as some connections that can be made with the young people themselves. I will follow on from this to discuss my own personal learning and links with the stories provided.

The aim of this chapter is not to provide a deeper analysis of the learning process and the themes linking different peoples' learning. Rather it is to provide an impression of the Project and those involved as well as to provide the base for further literary analysis to be made later on in the second section of my thesis. I would like to begin by giving an impression of the people involved in the Project.

Meeting the people involved in the Project

In this section I provide an overview of who was involved in the Project during the period of the research, who was interviewed and brief rationale for these choices. My research spans the period from 2006- 2010, and I have included observations, meetings, activities from across this time. The interviews were carried out between September 2008 and May 2010 and focused on the core group of young people, those who attended on a regular basis over a period of about a year. There were a total of 50 young people in this core group during this time. Alongside this core group, 97 (young people were involved in short courses or for specific activities. I interviewed eleven young people from the core group who represented the group and outcomes.

Table of young people who attended the Project core group and those interviewed.

| No of young people in core group | Role/ involvement in project | Interviewed | Rationale |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|----------------------|--|
| 4 (male) | Core group 2005/2006 | 1 (male) | One had moved away, one to college and two had tried to set up in business. The interviewee was one of those who had tried to set up in business. |
| 14 (13 male, 1 female) | Core group 2006/2007 | 4 (3 male, 1 female) | The four interviewed represented the range of destinations of young people. These included two who went on to further training, one who had moved on to volunteering but was out of work again, and one who had not settled. |
| 11 (10 male, 1 female) | Core group 2007/2008 | 3 (male) | The three interviewed represented the fluctuation in progression for many of the young people |
| 13 (male) | 2008/2009 | 3 (male) | The interviewees represented two without a clear idea of what they wanted to do and the other who had. |

Meeting young people involved in the Project

This section focuses on the young people involved in the Project. I will begin by giving a general impression of these individuals before moving on to provide more detailed stories of four individuals.

Most of the young people fall into the 'sustained NEET' category which I explored in the previous chapter. Many of those who come along to the Project are referred by the local college, Connexions, the Youth Service, other providers and Children's Services. They have a range of issues and have often had experiences which have put them off engaging with and trusting people, organisations and learning and most have few or no qualifications.

The following stories will give some examples of who they are, how they see themselves, and what they feel helps or hinders them in their journey to adulthood and work. I have also included observations from those in the project who are working with them. As far as possible, I decided to use their own words in order to avoid inferring and imposing my own views. This also allows the reader to get a stronger impression of the individual and the emotions involved in the subjects they discuss. I use the present tense to bring the reader into the scene, making these young people more 'real' and making the stories as personal and present as possible. I begin with Hal's story

Hal's story

Hal is nineteen years old; he is tall, dark haired and thin and walks with a slight stoop. As I arrive, he is sweeping up the training room and leans on his broom to wave hello.

He works slowly, and today he seems to lack concentration. The radio is on, and while the two builders are getting on with some of the more complex tasks, he and Jake are meant to be cleaning up.

He has been involved in the Project for over a year. When he first started, he was always getting into trouble; he messed about, and did not really seem to be interested in the work. He had been going to a youth training provider, where all of the young people attending had to choose a practical work placement, of which the Project was an option. He had not initially wanted to come to the Project, his preference would have been to work at the local Football club; but too many people had chosen this. He and a couple of other young men had been sent to the Project, and were told if they did not come, there would be a financial punishment, as Hal explained:

“I didn’t want to come here, but then I come and they said ...I had to otherwise your benefits would get stopped.”

This reluctance and sense of lack of real choice manifested itself in his attitude to the Project. He and one of the friends he came with spent a lot of time playing pranks and finding ways to avoid any work:

‘..so I came here, like at the start I wasn’t behaving too well, like chucking cement around and, and James said to me, quite a few warnings and I might get chucked off the course and I thought I better start buckling down and start doing it.’

He had been close to being asked to leave the Project, because of this lack of interest or commitment to the work. However he was given one last chance, and with the threat of being asked to leave and not come back, he seemed to reflect and make the commitment for himself:

‘I just take it seriously [now], [at first] I thought it was a joke really, and I got really distracted from doing anything. And I started mucking about and I thought, I didn’t like

coming here and then Paul and James took me and told me that I might get chucked off the course. I didn't want to do that. So I did enjoy it, and it's changed my life ...' Hal

For Hal coming to the project with a friend, meant his allegiance was to the friend. He had not fully considered what the project and the work might mean for him, it was 'a bit of a joke'. Because he did not have to make a commitment for himself at this point, he could still see it as something apart, something he was detached from.

Hal had various jobs before, including some work with his Dad and working as a window cleaner. He talks about the difference in his attitude to work, and how the ethos of respect for others at the Project helped his attitude to work, and encouraged him to have a more positive outlook:

'Yeah, where we was working before...I remember they keep moaning and getting me involved. And here there's no moaning whatsoever, really. Here everyone treats you with respect; it made me want to have a go; to get a job done.'

In his previous jobs he had felt laughed at, belittled and undermined, and in an attempt to preserve his self respect, had switched off from wanting to work. He was aware that he did not like a combative atmosphere, where people were not respected:

'They actually used to put me down a lot, where I used to work. And that when I quit, I didn't want to work no more.'

For Hal, what he felt he gained from work and enjoyed the most at the Project, was learning new skills and meeting new people and having a sense of respect for and from others. Hal clearly identified people and key aspects, which had given him the confidence to try new things. One example of this was a course run at the Project, about presentation skills. This gave him the strength to talk to groups of people about the project, and what he had gained:

‘If it weren’t for her [the facilitator] I wouldn’t have done any of the presentations I don’t think. I was so shy and like, standing up in front of all those people. She gave us a lot of confidence she did, and we so she helped me as well.’

Hal, along with a couple of other young people from the project, had done two presentations. The first one was to staff within the local authority, and although this was fairly small, he had felt much more nervous doing this than when he came to do a presentation for an award:

‘I was just so nervous, I don’t really know why. Everyone just listened to you, that was a major, that was quite a privilege, just really actually, that was good. Everyone enjoyed it and we got asked a lot of questions and that.... was good.’

Hal found the experience of doing the first presentation very powerful. Having a group of people who listened carefully to what was said, and then dealing with questions, moved him and made him reflect on what he had gained from the Project. It made him feel satisfied, and that all the effort of the preparation for the talk was appreciated. He felt that it had all been worthwhile:

‘Happy, makes me happy, I put a lot of effort into it.’

For Hal the sense of satisfaction and achievement he gained from the presentations, together with the culmination of his achievements at the Project, were much greater than he had ever expected. He talked with real pride of the work he had done: being involved in putting a roof on the main building at the Project, being involved in other work, being able to see tangible results from this, and having a sense, for once, of being taken seriously by others and himself:

‘To tell you the truth, I wasn’t expecting this much to happen you know. Weren’t expecting none of this to happen, really. Nothing like that, nothing but little things like.’

Through being involved in the construction and refurbishment of the building, he could clearly see, in a tangible way, the contribution he was making:

‘We’re now starting the tin on the last bits. And the roof, we’ll put the insulation. We’re now half way through doing the tin one side and three quarters you know, and then, to feel we’ve done all this.’

Before he started at the Project he had not done any construction work at all. Through his time there he learnt bricklaying, cement mixing, and the use and handling of tools. He feels he has learnt a lot of skills and this makes him feel proud of his achievements. Hal said he felt:

‘Proud, privileged, none of it, there’s just stuff here that I hadn’t done before and I weren’t expecting to do, so it’s quite good to do it. I feel proud.’

As he became more involved in the project, not only his perception of himself, but also his perception of others were challenged. He noticed changes in people:

‘When I first come here, I thought Paul and James I thought they were really strict, but they’re not. Paul he can laugh, he do, and James as well. You do one thing and then you laugh, at the same time you have to work a little harder as well. I think, you find out new things day by day.’

For him the changes in relationships with staff members reinforced his view that work could be a positive experience; that it did not have to be full of conflict and argument.

The Project involves working in and around the local area, which has meant that the young people encounter members of the community. This can be through specific work, for example, working on a local garden, planting up planters in front gardens, helping with events, or helping in the community café which is part of the building. Greg, a volunteer in his seventies has been working at the Project, growing and tending

to plants for the local community projects. This has allowed Hal's learning about people he might not normally interact with to grow over his time at the Project, at first he did not really notice him but over time the relationship grew and respect for each other developed, Hal's description of Greg changed to 'He's awesome'; showing an increased awareness about relationships and his acquisition of some of these social skills and appreciation of others. This slow flowering and building of these community intergenerational learning opportunities, seems to allow young people to see and understand people from very different backgrounds, and at different stages of the life course. These interactions with others are an important aspect of the work of the Project. From observing these interactions, I could see older members of the community becoming like older members of the family, grandparent figures.

Hal has also shown developments in his emotional awareness of himself and others. His reaction to people during some of the more challenging encounters demonstrates this. One clear demonstration of this was given as the building work on the community café was close to completion, and many people involved in the Project were hurriedly working on it together. On the day before the official opening of the project, Hal, along with several other young people, community volunteers and staff, was working to complete all the final finishing details. One of the jobs was to finish the flooring on the step into the community room. However, when Hal went in to finish this piece of work, one of the volunteers who has become very protective of parts of the Project, was heard to shout at him 'Get out of my community room'. We listened for Hal's reaction. As the mounting pressure to finish on time accelerated, tension was running high and he could well have been expected to reply with a similar response. However, he replied with a gentle, 'Please don't speak to me like that.' The volunteer then repeated her request for him not to enter the room, but with an added 'Please'. He explained that he was trying to finish the step. Although he did not get a full apology, the other volunteer did calm down. He remained calm and focused on the work.

Hal talks about some other work he was involved in at a community centre, where they were working to build a shed and a ramp for wheelchairs. Here, local people would

come up and talk to them. Hal realises that the way he reacted to them has changed, and that now he is more able to feel relaxed enough to talk comfortably with people. Now, rather than being mono- syllabic, he is happier to expand:

‘[before] I wouldn’t say a lot, because not sure what their reaction would be. I didn’t really talk a lot. [Now] I can expand a lot, talk to them about what we’ve done and that.’

Hal talks about a specific project he was involved in where the young people were supervised to build two cars from five scrap ones and then went on a working trip to Europe. At first Hal had not even thought that the trip was going to happen, but as the time neared he realised that it was and his enthusiasm and commitment to the work increased:

‘Well, to be honest. I just thought Paul and George was just getting our hopes up and that. And it come to the last minute, I thought, whoa, we’re actually going and that. And when we got there it was awesome, like...’

For Hal the experience of a different culture and also the experience of being a bit of a celebrity were important aspects of this particular project. He realised that although people speak different languages it can still be possible to communicate and this helped him see things from a different perspective:

‘technically, talking a different sort of language, everyone just loved us, the cars and that, they was surprised about that and um the experience different, the atmosphere, er a lot of things, we had to do a bit of work that was good, but that was hard, getting up early and that. That was good, a really good laugh, building the cars. The whole thing.’

Hal seems to have gained a lot from this particular project, which has added to his overall learning from the Project as a whole. Hal’s learning seems to have been

strengthened by allowing himself to get involved and committed to the Project through the relationships he developed both within it and with members of the community. This also brought with it opportunities in relation to work outcomes that previously he would have thought unachievable. On the day of the official opening of the Project Hal arrived beaming, saying, 'I can't believe it, I can't believe it.' He explained that he had been offered a two-week work trial with a building firm, that same morning. All day when he caught my eye, he did a thumbs-up sign and beamed. Hal's reaction to this outcome seems to support Wolf's (2010) suggestion that work and employment opportunities and outcomes are an important focus for projects like this one and especially for the young people themselves.

Hal proceeded with the work experience and at the end of this, the employer got in touch with the Project to give feedback. The feedback Paul had from the employer was that Hal had worked really well on the two week work experience. But at the end of the second week, Paul heard that Hal had walked off site and lost the job. The following week Paul met up with Hal and heard his story. Hal explained that he had loved the work, but that one of the other workers had continually made derogatory remarks about his mother and sister and in the end Hal lost his temper. He said 'I threw my sandwiches at him, I could have thrown something harder, but I didn't want to hurt him.' The two other workers went off and left him and he sat for a while with his head in his hands and then phoned them on his mobile and said 'I'm going.'

Looking at this through the policy lens introduced in the previous chapter, in a situation such as this one, the concern is that some of the positive learning from enjoyable experiences might be lost or reduced by these negative experiences. However, Hal seems to have developed an ability to find positive learning from even some of the more challenging situations such as this one. Hal reflected on this and his interpretation was that: 'he done me a real favour, cause I love work and he's made me even more determined to get a job. I'm walking into any shops now and I'm not afraid to ask if they've got any work. I'm really goin' for it.' This determined and positive perspective of an experience, which, for many, would have been a devastating blow to

their confidence, demonstrates the resilience, confidence, self awareness and maturity that Hal has developed. Paul talked with him and fed back the positive comments from the employer, and they discussed how he could deal with it differently another time. Hal took control of the situation and saw that he could do things, he had moved away from seeing himself as a victim.

Jake's story

Jake is a tall, thin, blond haired lad of nineteen with a quiet and gentle manner. He found out about the project through Connexions and has been involved in the Project for just over one year. After the first year, he and Hal were invited to become apprentices for six months. A key trigger for Jake in deciding to come to the Project was his first visit and first impression of the place, and the fact that it was different from anything he had experienced before:

'Ur what interested me, it was a unique project it wasn't like anything I done before, and I enjoy construction and like so that's what interested me.'

Jake's first experience of work had been very difficult. He had worked on the rigs, where he was bullied and physically attacked, and he felt very nervous of meeting new people and getting involved in anything:

'It's been, it's been, not like anything I've done before. I didn't think I was going to enjoy it. At first, I do like construction, but, meeting new people I was a bit wary of that. When you get here it's just totally different to what you think.'

This was an important step towards having confidence and trusting other people in a working environment. For Jake, being respected and having a positive working atmosphere where people were not in conflict were both really important. He has

realised as he has got to know people over time that he can build trustful relationships and that not everyone is a bully:

‘People respect you and every fink; you get along with everyone, so that’s good. And since I’ve been here longer, I’ve um, got to know people more, better and it’s just like people.’

For Jake, the project had enabled him to trust others and find the self respect and confidence to try out new situations. This has helped him to find the enthusiasm and motivation to actively make things happen. His first experience of work on the rigs had made him retreat into himself and hide away, not able to take on new situations or work; however the Project has opened up possibilities for him:

‘It’s changed me, because when I come out of employment I was like and off shore, I didn’t enjoy it, I didn’t get no respect or nothing, but when I come here it was totally different. I didn’t want to work before or nothing and when I come here it put me into the mood of working. And I, I’ve done a lot of things. It’s just a totally different atmosphere than what I was usually in.’

For Jake being trusted is really important and it gives him a sense of pride. Despite this he acknowledges that it can also be scary and having to fall back on his own decisions is a daunting prospect. He was surprised by the level of trust people put in him:

‘They talk to me quite differently to what people used to talk to me like. Um I don’t know they’ve got quite a lot of trust in me and they leave me to do jobs by myself and that. Which I was quite shocked about.’

Over time Jake is getting used to this responsibility and it means he can get on with work without constantly having to defer, or wait for someone else to make the decisions. He notes that this can be positive for the work process, particularly in relation to the speed of the job:

‘And we just get on with it, if we don’t know we ask Simon, after that we just fly through it.’

When Jake first joined the Project he was very introverted and would avoid contact or conversation with others. Now, through building trusting relationships and feeling respected by both staff and young people, and through doing several presentations with others from the project, he now feels that he can talk to anyone:

‘I just go up to anyone and ask questions. I was scared to ask anyone [before].’

This has been a dramatic change in character and confidence for Jake. Like Hal, Jake completed a presentation course which has given him enormous self-esteem and skills, and he now has the confidence to talk in front of strangers and explain the project and his feelings. This new found confidence shows in the way he holds himself and the fact that once he starts talking, he can forget about the audience:

‘Don’t know how many, there was quite a lot. I don’t know roughly, when I got up I didn’t really care how many people was there, I just got on with it.’

Another key area of achievement for Jake is the fact that he can feel proud of the work he does. It is important for him to be able to visually see the product, the building, and knowing that he has significantly contributed to it. At the start Jake had no confidence or belief in himself that he could achieve anything. However he now realises that this tangible product gives him a real sense of achievement:

‘one of the main ones was that I’ve got a lot of pride in my building and what we done. When I first came I didn’t think it was possible to do what we’ve done. And now we’ve done it I’m really proud of it.’

Jake also feels a sense of achievement in relation to the Project as a whole and the

combined contributions that everyone has made to it. He describes how all the people in the Project are able to contribute in some way, showing a change in his attitude towards working with others for a common goal:

‘Made me feel quite happy about what we’ve achieved and that, not just the [building] but I’m happy about everyone who’s come here, like everyone participated and that.’

Similarly, Jake has observed other young people and how the project has impacted on them. He talked about one of the young people who had been through the project, who got in to a lot of trouble and did not seem to have changed. He had seen him some time later and noticed that he has now gone on to college and moved on from the cycle of constant trouble making:

‘One of the people who’s come here, they was always in trouble and, but I’ve found out he’s actually moved on and he’s gone on to college, he’s not getting into trouble no more. There’s a few people that come here like that. Like naughty at first and then like when he got told to stop, he like did and sort of sorted himself out and just got on with it ...’

This shows awareness about other people and also the impact that the Project had on them. Jake was beginning to look at other people in new ways and developing an understanding of how people can be changed by different experiences.

However, it is not only an understanding of the changes that have occurred in others that Jake has noticed, but also the developments he himself has made. This is particularly important for him in relation to his role at the Project; He sees his position as an apprentice, but also as a mentor and positive role model for other young people there. As someone who has come through the Project, he feels he can understand the process that the new young people joining the project have been going through:

..... ‘when they first come here, um when they first come here they were naughty they

get talked to and sort themselves out and then they look at me and they, cause that was what we used to be like and then they look up to us. We're doing this.'

This is an important level of reflection which has now allowed Jake to look back at his own behaviour, through his observations of other. However, this apprenticeship role model experience was not entirely successful for Jake and Hal. They found that they were still too close to the stage of development of the young people that they were meant to be mentoring, and as time went on their behaviour reverted. When they were with these other young people, rather than being positive role models, they started messing about again. Paul reflected on this process:

'They weren't ready to be apprentices; they hadn't come far enough through the process to be able to hold the boundaries. We were asking too much of them.' Paul

Despite the issues derived from the mentoring programme, Jake has been able to look in more detail at his own responsibilities in relation to the Project. Reflecting on the process of making a commitment to the Project, Jake feels that the decision to make behavioural changes is clearly made by the individuals themselves and that this approach seemed to work for the young people at the Project:

'And they get one more chance and then after that they, stop what they're doing and decide to change.'

Being treated with respect in this way contrasts greatly with Jake's previous experience of working on the rigs, being bullied, attacked and not treated respectfully had made him very unhappy. Before Jake got involved in the Project He withdrew from any experiences that might challenge him, and retired into himself; seeing himself as a victim:

'I got held by the throat and that, so I kept myself to myself and like not happy. I was scared to work, scared to go outdoors, I stayed indoors.'

Through his experiences at the Project, building relationships, feeling respected and trusted, gaining skills and seeing the tangible results, Jake was clear that things had changed for him:

‘Now I’ve got friends and I got a girl friend. My life’s changed now.’

The fact that people at the Project can get straight down to work appears to be one of the most effective factors in engaging young people, like Jake in learning the skills and attitude for work. Jake observes both for himself and for others that often young people are interested in practical work and that they often get put off by too much written work:

‘I don’t know, most people want to do hands on jobs don’t they, but then when they come here. Most people expect to do paper work, don’t they, but then when they come here they straight, they get to work straight away. That’s what I think changed most people, just not many jobs you can just go into and do hands on work straight away.’

For Jake the experience of the Car Challenge, which gave him this type of hands on experience, as well as a taste of other cultures and an international experience, was very positive:

‘I found it really interesting, what their lifestyle is like and that. The projects, I really liked the [homeless project] one, I got a lot from that.... It’s made me think about things differently. And from that money that we got awarded we’re going to visit two other projects, and perhaps we’ll get a few more tips from that.’ Jake feels he has learnt and gained a lot from these experiences and opportunities which were very new from him. He also seems to have grown an enthusiasm for this learning and for voluntarily continuing with this in the future.

Mark's story

Mark is quietly spoken, small and thin, with dark hair. He is now working full time delivering fruit for a local company and is very proud of the fact that the van he is driving is new and top of the range. Mark first came to the Project with his friend Bill; they had both been doing a course with another local training provider and came to the Project for the practical placement. Interestingly, like Hal and Jake, Mark and Bill wanted to go to the Project together. It appears as if their friendship and mutual support gave them the confidence to join. Mark's early experiences of education had not been very positive, and he had been thrown out of school with no qualifications. He recognised that he needed to sort out where he was going, in order to feel a sense of achievement:

'I got kicked out of school. When I left school I had no GCSEs so but I won't really goin' anywhere really fast.'

For Mark, like others, the Project allowed him to do something that gave an immediate sense of achievement, and was practical and satisfying and through which he could feel and see that he was progressing. He was also able to gain some qualifications that provided certificates recognised by other organisations and employers:

'.. it was different cause it was like more hands on, that's the sort of stuff like, more than doin' sittin' in a class room and learning from paper work work, I'd rather get hands on and get into it like. It was better cause I see myself movin' forward cause we got the qualifications for grass cutting and stuff like that.'

After a year of being involved in the Project, Mark and Bill were supported and enabled to establish a small enterprise. First of all they were able to apply for and obtain a small amount of funding towards equipment and materials and work with another social enterprise. It started off as a positive experience and gave them both a real sense of

achievement in contributing to both community projects and also starting to make their own business work. Unfortunately, as time went on the person in charge of the organisation they were doing work for did not honour his obligations, and this left Bill and Mark feeling let down and used. Mark is very matter of fact about what happened, and does not seem to have let the experience knock back his confidence. He learns from it and takes responsibility for the steps he takes:

‘Paul helped me start up, well, we started up a business like, but ... it didn’t go as planned but, we give a go. That was good as well cause I felt I was actually getting somewhere in my life. I thought actually I made something of my life but unfortunately we didn’t get no further so.’

Mark shows his ability to reflect positively on these experiences, and rather than feeling angry about the situation, he applied for a job, which he got, and is determined to make the best of his situation:

‘I’m now a delivery driver .. I’ve been there nearly a year, it’s all right, it not too brilliant pay but it’s alright for four days a week, it’s alright. It give you freedom, three days off a week so..’

Mark talks about how he has developed and what triggered him to engage with learning and work. For him a very important factor is being treated with respect, both as an adult and as someone who can make choices and decisions for themselves. Although the experience of the gardening work was not all positive, he recognises that he needed to take responsibility for changing the situation:

‘what happened at school I din’t really want to sit down I was I was like always being naughty and that, but when I was here I was getting on with it cause they was actually treating you like adults here and like at school they treat you like little kids and like that. [The Project] really, really changed my life. I was like, I didn’t think I could really get anywhere, but like down here I learnt ... more than I did at school so, so yeah it was

better.'

Clearly for Mark this realisation that not only are there people in life who will treat him with the respect he deserves, but also he has the ability to adapt his own situation, was something that has had a profound impact on his life and self-esteem. Moving from the voluntary work to paid work has given Mark more confidence and pride in being able to make his way as an adult: 'I feel I've moved on cause I actually got a job and get paid so.' He noticed huge changes in his friend Bill whom he has known a long time through school and the previous training provider. Before he moved to the town he had been in a lot of trouble with schools and had been banned from several:

'.. I knew him through school ..he was in the same sort of boots as I was and he was getting kicked out of school, no school would accept him. When he come down here he got his head sorted.'

Mark feels that, as in his own case and the case of Bill, the most important aspects for young people moving towards employment or other training is confidence, and that without it is impossible to be able to apply for jobs or put yourself forward for an interview. He is also clear that qualifications are important and as someone who came out of school with none, he is acutely aware of the disadvantage this puts you in:

'.. you've got to have a lot of confidence to find a job and that as there's hardly any jobs around [the local town] for people who haven't got any qualifications and people didn't do well at school. For example I didn't do well at school and I couldn't get in to college, they didn't accept me 'cause my maths and English weren't good, 'cause I didn't learn them at school and that.'

Mark acknowledges his responsibility for doing something about this, but also notes that when he feels he is respected and treated as an adult, he is more likely to respond positively. He reflects on his attitude to school and college:

‘So it was my fault really, but then again I, they could of treat you more like adults really and I might have enjoyed it more so.’

Reflecting on his time at school and his experiences of education since, Mark notes that he would want it to be different, but blames himself for his lack of success:

‘If I could turn back the clocks I’d be good at school and get a decent job.’

For Mark the Project gave him the confidence to go on to find work. The key element that made the Project different to other settings was that he was treated with respect and felt valued:

‘.. some people don’t have much confidence to go out and look for a job and speak to different people and some people are like not used to talking to different people a lot so, you do need confidence, well a bit of confidence. Anyway and I got a lot of confidence when I come down here cause well actually getting spoken to like adults , really good. I liked the place.’

He felt that the project staff showed him what to do, and then he was allowed to do it on his own; to practise without having someone looking over his shoulder. This allowed him to feel that he could do it himself, and build the confidence to try out the skills he was learning. After he had finished the work, staff would come and give feedback and say what could be done better or give him a chance to try doing it again, without being humiliated or made to feel a failure:

‘When we were down here we got taught, we got shown how to do and then we got left alone to do it, but there weren’t people on our backs on our cases all the time, saying you ain’t doin’ that right, you just do it, they just left you to do it and then they come down and after you finished and have a look at it and told you what they thought. If it weren’t good enough, knock it down and start again , which that’s what was really good, cause that if they’re on your case all the time, you’re not going to get

to do it are you. It's do that thing.'

Providing an informal structure where independent learning is valued appears to be one of the main differences between school learning and the Project that the young people valued. Mark acknowledges that being asked to redo a piece of work can be frustrating, but also that it can be a way to improve. He also felt that having experience on a 'real job', not just something being done temporarily for the qualification, enables you to see the tangible product, and made him feel much more valued. Mark reflects on how he felt when asked to redo something to improve it:

'felt a bit annoyed, cause you spent all that time but in a way that's making you better, cause the more you practise the better you get, really so yeah. So it was good, it really was good and I liked it when we done the wall there cause they just say, rebuild that wall and left you to get on with it, they taught you how to do a couple of courses and that, and to get you used to it, clean the bricks chop them, and after they shewed us how to do a couple of layers they just left us to get on with it. They just do it, really was good.'

For Mark, this process and the fact that you learn as you go along, sometimes slowly and little bits at a time, enables you to learn through making mistakes:

'if they just leave you to get on with it and tell you afterwards then ...you can learn as you go along, even though it's not actually good enough, your still going to learn by them bits and learn by your mistakes.'

Mark was involved in the Project early on, when the family in an adjacent property helped out by giving them water. Mark felt that he learnt a lot from meeting and being with different people, as well as from doing different jobs and this made the work more interesting and unexpected:

'It was a help cause you learn bits off people of all different ages, they all know

different things, so you learn a bit here there and everywhere, cause I was learning things every day I was down here. Not doin' the same thing every day, if you know what I mean, it was a bit adventurous and that. 'Cause you're not sitting there doing the same job and that get boring; whereas we was doin' bits and bobs and that doing different things every day.'

From this variety of experiences and his previous time in education at school, Mark talks about how he recognises what helps or hinders young people moving towards work or training. He observes that as young people grow and develop they start to take responsibility, and that this can be scary. However he points out that this also brings the importance of feeling that you are making a contribution and taking responsibility:

'.. when you leave school you're moving to independence you got to go out to work to pay your way .. when you're at school you got no worries. ..it is scary going out into the big wide world. Once you get settled down it shouldn't be too bad, should it.' Mark

Mark again points out that it was not feeling respected that contributed to him behaving badly at school. The Project appears to provide an atmosphere where young people feel respected, able to try things out in an 'adult style':

'.. that was the reason I was naughty at school, 'cause they didn't treat you as adults as little kids and I thought I'm not having any of this cause I am adult anyway 'cause I am one, not as a kid that's why if you treated like a little kid you act like a little kid. They treat you like an adult you act like an adult, so it really was good.'

Mark reflects on what he sees as the most important factors in supporting young people towards independence. These are, being treated with respect to slowly build skills and confidence, and encouraging team work:

'treat them like an adult from the younger stages and they just get on and then they won't act like kids and so they'll have more confidence so go out and find a job. Doing

things like this they can work as a team it was good, not just like I'll do my bit and you do your bit like, to work together.'

For Mark and Bill, contributing to some of the work out in the community was very important in giving them a sense of pride. Seeing how people in the community appreciated what they had done gave them a sense of worth, as did being given the responsibility to make decisions and follow them through: 'We really helped out and I felt pleased with myself.'

Mark felt that since leaving the Project he has often used the skills he learnt like working as part of a team, supporting each other and also being aware of the needs of others.

Saul's Story

Saul, is small and slight with dark hair, he has a very pale complexion and is quietly spoken. He lives with his mum and his younger brother who has behavioural issues, his sister, and her baby. Saul's mother has brought the family up on-her-own and he appears to take on the role of responsible parent. Saul was involved with the Project for about two years at the start of the project. He came first as a referral from a local training provider, and he helped with the initial clearing and site preparation, when the only decent indoor space was a yellow port-a-cabin. Saul concentrated well and was keen to learn bricklaying and other practical skills. He is reticent about talking but, as he gets to know people, the silences and brief conversations are more relaxed. He loves working on mechanical repairs and is very patient, putting things back together. He also completed qualifications in safe use of mowers. On the days Saul came and worked, he ate lightly, and then the most important ritual, a cigarette outside, when he could quietly be by himself. The highlights for him were the occasional bonfires we had at the end of the day, to clear the rubbish. He would help Paul and stand and stare at the flames and talk about what he hoped for. For Saul, these occasions gave him some one-

to-one time, when he had only himself and the task in hand to think about.

He joined the group who went to France to do a couple of weeks work there. He was firmly committed to doing this, although it was the first time he had stayed away from home. When they first arrived in France, in the middle of the countryside, he said, 'I'm not sure I can cope with this silence'. But after a few days he was really enjoying watching the wildlife, identifying birds and walking to the nearby woods. His initial fears and concerns about missing his family too much were soon forgotten. For Saul this first visit to a foreign country opened up new experiences and the chance to do something for himself, without the concerns of the family, and responsibility for his brother.

Although Saul had many skills and aptitudes, he still seemed to find it difficult to commit himself and make that extra effort to move into work, or perhaps he found it difficult to leave his family and his sense of responsibility for them. At the end of this period he got involved in the Car Challenge project and helped, with the other young people, to build two cars in preparation for going on a trip abroad. Saul really engaged with this process and worked on the cars as part of the team. He still tended to operate on the periphery of the group but seemed comfortable there. When the day came to leave, he was ready with the others at 5am, wearing his Bermuda shorts. This trip for Saul meant that he could feel confident, because he had already experienced France before. As this was his second visit, he could support the others, who were going for the first time. Saul was not thrown off course when one of the other young people started behaving badly; he continued to keep his concentration on the tasks at hand.

For Saul these experiences seemed important, and he was always willing to come along and contribute to meetings and discussions about the future of the Project, and what he wanted for himself. At one of the meetings about the future of the Project, Saul was clear that for him, it was very important that the community should be involved in the project and that it could offer training courses for young people and the community.

Saul has identified some of the things that would be useful for him in the next stages towards employment. These included 'somewhere to talk', access to information about jobs, 'somewhere to update and print a CV, feeling like there is someone there when you need them, volunteering, staff who understand.'

Although Saul is perhaps not yet ready to commit to finding and holding down a job, he does feel that some of these things to help him in the next stage are provided by his contact with the Project. He talks about how the Project has and could continue to support:

'It kept me occupied, something to do I obviously haven't found a job yet. Still, I need help, you can always help me, I know I will get support through it as well.' Saul

Common threads

These sample stories gathered from young people involved in the Project bring to light some common aspects which I think are important to explore. Many of the young people talk about different types of learning, their experiences and perceptions, their fears and ambivalence to training and the importance for them of being respected and not feeling used.

For Hal, The decision to make a commitment was clearly important, a realisation that he would lose his place at the Project made him think about what he wanted and he had to make a choice. It also made him reflect and realise that he was enjoying what he was doing. Developing relationships of trust with staff and with some members of the community, seeing that learning and work could be positive experiences, and working alongside people with very different backgrounds, were important elements for his learning process.

Learning through seeing practical and tangible results which contributed to the Project as a whole and gaining a sense of achievement are themes that reoccur in the stories. For Mark seeing that he was progressing and realising that what he was doing had currency in the wider community, through gaining qualifications that were recognised, were both important. Mark also talks about being able to do the work on his own, being able to take feedback about it and have a chance to learn from his mistakes by trying again, without feeling humiliated. For Hal and others the importance of affirming learning through explaining to others, such as giving a presentation, solidified the learning for them.

For the young people, learning to deal with conflict in an emotionally mature manner and being given the space to do this without anyone stepping in, realising that they are active agents in the situation was clearly important. Many talk about situations where they have dealt with knock backs, reflecting and building resilience. For Mark, the sense of feeling used by an organisation he had worked with after the Project, both spurred him on to make a change and to reflect on what he wanted to do.

Learning can also involve fear of the unknown, having to take responsibility and realising that they have to get on with it themselves. The young people also talk about learning through being taken out of their comfort zone, learning about how experiencing different people, cultures and language enabled them to see things from a different perspective, see beyond the familiar. While this is scary, the Project gives them the confidence and support to be able to do this. Jake talks about his previous work experience where he withdrew from any experiences that might challenge him.

Jake reflects about other young people and how learning can happen later for some people, he talks about seeing one of the young people who did not commit at the Project, now going to the college. For Hal and Jake, the apprenticeship model did not seem to work; they seemed to find the transition to the role of mentor, difficult. For some young people in the Project learning with and from other young people, staff and with members of the community was important. I want to explore now some of the

stories gathered from members of the community who have been involved with the Project.

Meeting members of the local community

This section focuses members of the local community who became involved in the Project at various stages and their perceptions of the Project, the community, young people and the process of learning. I begin by giving an overview of the location, local community and volunteers involved, before going on to provide the stories of three of the community members involved.

The Project is set in the middle of a residential area and one of the Project's aims is to engage and involve the community. I have chosen to include in the case study members of the community who have interacted in some way or directly been involved with the Project, to situate it in the local surroundings both geographically but also as a community of interest. The following information has come from interviews, meetings, conversations and observations of some of the local people who have been in some way involved with the Project to date. When the Project started the first two local people who became involved were Louise and her husband Vernon, then Greg became involved through the poly tunnel and then Henry who has helped with decorating the building before the official opening. Here are their stories of how they have got involved, what this has meant for them and how they have related to and see the way young people move towards training and work. I begin with Greg.

Greg

Greg is in his seventies, he is slim, light on his feet, with a shock of brown hair and a

broad grin. He wears a hearing aid but still finds it very hard to hear when more than one person is talking. Greg has lived in the area since the 1960s, moving in when he got married. He worked as a builder until he retired. He talks about the area and how it was when he first moved there with his wife, Eleanor. In contrast to the usual common idea that people in the old days got on better, his memories are of a life where people kept themselves to themselves:

‘Well, it’s funny really, you do know the names of roads and all that but that even, then you didn’t know all the people, you knew the people three or four up from you or three or four down and that was it, you know. You never got involved with one another years ago, and that but you know what I mean, they kept themselves, they kept themselves to themselves more or less didn’t they?’

For Greg his experience is that nowadays people are more likely to talk to you, but also he thinks that this might be due to his stage in life, that he and others his age have more time and perhaps are less afraid of talking to others:

‘I found that people, you know are more, more, there are people who they seem to speak to you more nowadays than they did years ago. Well I think, perhaps that’s because I’m getting older. It might be that, I was only twenty odd when we moved here, perhaps you don’t speak; they’re all older people here anyhow.’

When he moved to the area in the 60s the Project was still a builder’s yard and his memories are of a rather tumbled down building even then, where people just used to ‘chuck all their gear’.

Greg first got involved in the project, somewhat reluctantly. He was asked if he would help with the poly tunnel. The plan was to grow plants for planters and he said he didn’t want to get involved but was happy to give advice:

‘I said that sounded interesting and they said, there goin’ to have a poly tunnel in there

with herbs and that sort of thing. To start with I didn't want to get involvedBut I don't want to do anything on a regular basis.'

He started in this way and slowly got tempted in to help more and more, partly because he saw another volunteer who was only able to come in a couple of times a week. Greg started to take over from her and the poly tunnel very quickly became his kingdom:

'That was what two years ago. And then afterward I thought, I don't know, I haven't got very much to do, and the funny thing was ..during the summer, and I just said, I more or less took over, I took over to do it and I come up almost every day and that.'

This move from reluctant advisor who stands on the edge and looks in, to a committed and daily volunteer is very similar to the experience of some of the young people, as they stand on the line before taking the plunge to commit themselves to a work or training experience. For Greg, this immersion and commitment has meant that he has regained a real enjoyment in life. He has a clear purpose and can see very tangible outcomes for his labours:

'I like it I, I enjoys it, that's given me an incentive to do something each day. Cause when you're retired you know, it's like you've been working all your life and then when you retire, you got nothing to do have you?'

This is echoed by his wife Eleanor who says that it has changed his life. Greg, at first was absorbed in the plants and the poly tunnel and only really encountered the young people by chance, apart from when he specifically worked with them on a project that involved planters for the local streets. This involvement with the plants, the Project and the young people has grown and he plans to do even more here in the next year:

'Now I'm more involved, a seven day a week job, and next year I'm goin' to take a bit longer cause I got all the seeds and that..'

This is Greg's first experience of a community project and he has begun to develop more conversations with the young people, 'and I talk to the lads every morning. ...I enjoy it, well some of the boys are good boys really, and I enjoy it, they're very good some of them...'

For Greg the project has changed his own life, he talks about how he just used to sit at home and was bored, whereas now he is so excited and involved that each day he can't wait to come up to the Project. He has begun to observe the changes and commitment of the young people too. Like him, at the start they are reluctant to communicate or to commit themselves, until they start to build relationships with others at the Project:

'Well what I think it is, that when they first come here, so, often don't know anybody and they don't say a lot, then after a week or two they get in with the other [young people] they really enjoy it, they really enjoy doing the job.'

For Greg the transition from childhood to work in the early fifties meant that he really did not have any choice, he had to get work:

..'well I was looking forward to it until I started and then after about a week, I thought now, what have I let myself in for, that sort of thing. But then after awhile, you just get used to it and the days go through.'

He reflects on realising that he had to get on with it and just got down to work. He grasped the situation and got on with it, and realising that he had no choice, threw him into an immediate commitment.

Greg's observations of some of the young people when they start at the Project are that some have that commitment and interest right from the start, while others who are perhaps just observing from the sidelines; begin to get involved through their contact with others. For Greg this 'throwing yourself in' and getting involved is

essential to get the most from the situation, it is only through this immersion that you start to really enjoy it and make the connections with others and get hooked in:

‘After you get more involved and you think that it ain’t too bad in the back of your mind and then do a bit more and a bit more and you start to enjoy it you got, I think you got something to wake up to, something to look forward to in the morning. That’s how I am; I just think oh, I’ll just nip up the Project I couldn’t get up here quick enough.’

He thinks that this is true for young people as well, that it is when you start to let yourself get involved you learn the most from an experience and enjoy it the most. He also reflects on his learning and the importance of working outdoors in a practical way and how this relates to some of the young people: ‘It’s outside, you see ever since I left school I’ve had outside jobs, never been on an inside job, see the first I worked on a golf course and then in the building industry.’

For Greg, the most important strategies for learning are, to ‘Watch listen and do.’ He observed how the young people behaved; taking in what was going on and then eventually, in their own time, doing it for themselves:

‘I watched the boys when James was here, they sat watching and then after a while, watching each other then they all of a sudden have a go and then as the days go on they get better. I mean you can’t learn to lay a brick from a book, can you? They try to tell you that, but that don’t work....Watching and doing is much better. That’s where I’ve learnt most of my building skills and that, watch bricklayers and that..’

Greg feels that having the space to try out the skills, without the pressure or derision of others, means that it is possible to put the skills in to practice and learn through mistakes:

‘.. having a go to see if you can get on with it, if it don’t go ok you don’t do it no more, if you can’t get on with it. ...nowadays, if you can’t do something they always seem to

take the micky out of you and everything, you're useless, you're no good, they don't give nobody a chance, or nothing.'

Greg also recognises the importance of trying out different skills. He feels that to learn something new, people and particularly young people, need to be given the space to test out their knowledge and skills and make mistakes:

'They haven't had a chance to try anything, nobody let them do anything. If I was a young boy, [I'd] need to have the opportunity.'

Reflecting again on his own experiences as a young person, Greg recognises that young people, as he did, often concentrate better on their own: 'you get two or three and they start messing about, and if you tell em anything they don't listen. One at a time that's enough. We used to be the same, you'd get a crowd of you, and then you mess about.' Greg's reflections on learning come from his own experiences and observations. He enjoys reading, but at school he did not enjoy 'book learning', preferring practical skills. He feels that young people learn often from practical activities, and for many 'book learning' is not the primary focus. Due to this he believes that it is important for young people to be given opportunities to learn from others across the generations, often one to one, allowing them to test out new skills without being judged. Through this process they can gain confidence and put their new skills into practise. He talks about how important the Project has been for him, giving him a new focus, enjoying talking to, working with and seeing the young people develop.

Henry

Henry is in his seventies and originally comes from a large inner city; he lives with his wife in a house that overlooks the Project. He became involved in the Project just as the building neared completion, and helped with the decorating, hanging shelves and

doors in the community room. He is at the Project almost every day now and is continuing to help with putting up shelves. He and Greg have come to know each other well. Henry talks about his own experiences as a young person and difficulties finding and settling down to work. Although he had been in trouble himself in his youth, he talks about how he stood up for injustices and how his experiences made him reflect and made him determined to find work, starting with anything he could get and working his way up to a skilled position:

' I got in as a bouncer, in a cinema, I didn't really like the job but it's some jobs you just have to do and I was asked would I like to be an operator, showing films, yeah, why not and I started as tea boy, sweep up, make the tea and that, .. if you want to get on you got to do them things.' He worked his way up through the jobs until he became a skilled cinema projectionist. Henry's experiences, both of a difficult start and lack of education, have made him aware of the struggles many young people have in finding their way to adulthood and employment. When young people do seemingly destructive or inconsiderate things to the Project, such as writing their name in the soft render on the building, rather than being angry, he acknowledges that it is something he might well have done as a young person. He talks about the Project as giving him a purpose and somewhere to use his skills. He has a gentle manner with the young people and has worked with some of them on the decorating, for example, showing them how to cut in on the skirting boards and windows.

Louise

Louise is in her late fifties; she has always lived in the area and is very interested in what is going on. She lives with her husband Vernon who was given early retirement on the grounds of ill health. She can be abrupt, sometimes coming into the Project giving commands. Despite this, Louise is also one of the Project's closest allies, believing that the Project has been beneficial not only for the young people involved, but also for the

community as a whole. She has lived in the area since she was a child; she talks about some of her early experiences of living in the area:

‘So I’ve know this area ever since I was big enough to go to school on me own. ... the alleyways were my playground and .. the buildings, the alleys the people, they’re all part of my background.....where I’ve grown up.’

Typical of many people in the area, Louise has never moved away. The only move they made when she was a child was moving from one side of the town to the other. Louise’s memories of the building now used by the Project go back a long time; she remembers it always as some sort of builder’s yard and of playing in and around it as a child. She remembers some of the buildings changing hands, but the area and buildings have remained the same, apart from the loss of some of the shops and the post office which used to be a hub for the local community:

‘There used to be more of a community feel around here because everybody used the post office to collect your pension, everybody used the newsagent and because specialised shops have gone, there’s no um, there’s no community base anymore.’

Louise got involved in the Project early on when it first started and the initial clearing of the site was done. Louise and Vernon felt a sense of relief that something was happening to the building and that someone would take responsibility for it. Louise describes how she kept a watchful eye on the developments at the Project and helped by providing water in the first year when no facilities were on site. She also supported the Project by helping run car boot sales to get local residents in. Louise got involved with the community room and she was on the committee from the start and helped chose the equipment and furniture. It is interesting to look at how Louise sees the Project and her role in helping involve people from the community:

‘The [community room] was, was Paul’s suggestion in the first place, oh he always wanted to get the community involved in the Project, and I’ve done my best to get

people involved. I tried the boot sales, to raise money for the Project, more than anything. .. I've tried getting people together.'

Despite being proud of her initial involvement in the Project, she goes on to talk about wanting to leave once the project is established:

'.. now we're going to have a [community room] there, ... I get things, oh, my ideas MY ideas would be to get things going in the [community room], ' at last got a space that we can use and once it's up and open and we've got one or two clubs going, then I'm backing out. I am backing out as an organiser; I don't need to be there.'

Louise has for some time talked about 'backing out' but then never quite does. She talks about how hard it is to get others involved. My observations are that some people can find her approach difficult. But the Project appears to have been a catalyst for her and Vernon to get involved in other activities, for example Louise took part in some training and research and they were both involved in a local community committee. She clearly found being actively involved in the decision and seeing the ideas she suggested have results very encouraging. The same is true of Vernon, it was through the Project that he became involved in a town funding committee, helping make decisions and allocate funding. Louise goes on to talk about the learning for herself and the increase in confidence she gained through talking to people and doing something different, learning a new skill:

'For me myself, it, it made me more confident to talk to people, 'cause, it seems weird, but I'm very shy. I lack confidence and doing that door knocking it was on a one to one basis I can face that... being in the precinct, yes it was fun, we was getting all these different people to answer the questionnaires but you weren't exactly talking to them until you'd finished the questionnaire..'

It is interesting to see some similarities in the way the Project has helped both Louise and many young people to build confidence. Louise describes the changes she has seen

in the young people as they have grown through the Project, 'you can just see them walking differently'. Both Louise and Vernon are very positive about what the Project has done for the young people, although they are more sceptical about local people getting involved, having found it difficult to get people along to events.

Different perspectives

In this section I explore the perspectives provided by both the members of community in the stories above and also the young people's stories given previously. I explore links between the experiences of both groups through individual and shared observations about the learning process and personal experiences.

These stories from young people and from the members of the community involved in the Project provide examples of different perspectives on learning, experiences, perceptions, fears and ambivalence to training.

Looking at the experiences of some of the community volunteers growing up, there are some similarities that can be drawn with the young people. Greg talks about the changes for him as he has got older, feeling more confident, less fearful than when he was younger. It is evident that for the young people this fear of failure or the unknown can also be difficult to overcome. But the stories also demonstrate that when they are supported to go beyond the familiar, they recognise how much they learn from the experience of being outside their comfort zone.

Greg also talks about how getting really immersed and committed meant he got more out of the learning process. Making a decision to commit and get involved in the learning process, choosing to step towards it was clearly important for Hal as well. For Louise when she talks about getting involved with a research project, at first she did not join in; creating a separateness, standing outside in order to avoid getting involved

in the learning process. It is when she felt confident to suggest and carry forward a practical solution that she became fully engaged in the process. Through the interviewing process she gained confidence in talking to people.

There are various aspects that people highlighted as important elements of a creative learning process, these included: Developing relationships of trust with staff and with some members of the community, seeing that learning and work could be a positive experience, and working alongside people with very different backgrounds. Like the young people, Greg wants to see tangible results, learn from practical activities, being able to try things out, and make mistakes without other people laughing at him. This echoes what many of the young people talk about; for Hal and Jake, seeing their work in the finished building gives them a real sense of achievement.

Working in an environment of respect is another issue reflected in many of the stories. Greg talks about the importance of being open to listen to and take advice. Many of the young people talk about the culture of the Project and the importance of feeling respected, being able to make mistakes without humiliation, developing through being given responsibility and the chance to try things out. It is in this environment of trust and respect that they feel able to reflect on what they have achieved and what could be improved.

Mark brings up some of the issues with formal learning experiences. He talks about his difficulty with more formal learning at school; he found it difficult to concentrate, wanting to learn through practical activity. Greg reflects a similar experience when he says, 'You can't lay a brick from a book, can you?' For him learning practical skills has to be done through physical experience.

Seeing tangible results that have currency in the wider community, and feeling a sense of progress was important for Mark. For Hal and others it was affirming learning through explaining to others, such as giving a presentation that solidified their learning. Learning to deal with conflict in an emotionally mature manner and being given the

space to do this without anyone stepping in and thereby realising that they are active agents in the situation was important for many of the interviewees. Many talked about reflecting on situations where they have dealt with knock backs, and built resilience. For Mark, the sense of feeling used by an organisation that he had progressed on to after the Project, both spurred him on to make a change and to reflect on what he wanted to do. For Hal his negative experience when he felt laughed at made him resolve to find work. Jake reflects about other young people and how learning can happen later for some people, he talks about seeing one of the young people who did not commit to learning at the Project, but is now going to the college.

Analysing these different perspectives from my research, I began to discover some common themes; developing relationships of trust and respect, having the space and freedom to experiment and try things, success and failure, being supported and encouraged to take an active role, taking responsibility, reflecting on what they have done and seeing the relevance of their learning. I would like to use these themes as the basis for my research and analysis, building up a theoretical framework of learning through the research process.

The learning process for me as a researcher

In this section I would like to link some of these themes to my own personal learning process as a researcher.

I feel it is also important to consider myself as a learner within the project and to reflect particularly on what the learning process during the gathering of the stories of the young people and the local community has meant for me. As I have interviewed people, I have recognised many of the aspects of the learning process they have described as being relevant to me as well. This research has pushed me out of my comfort zone, beyond the familiar, trying things out and hopefully listening and

learning from my mistakes. I have had to immerse myself in the process without knowing at times where it will lead. I have moved from a role in the Project planning and training to one of researcher and back again into being actively involved in the day to day running of the Project. This has also provided a challenge in writing this thesis as at times I have struggled to know which of my identities or 'voices' to use. This has been a new challenge and learning process for me.

I have been learning about myself through the process of gathering the data, reading literature, interviewing, and writing it up. At times I have felt lost in the process not knowing how some of the parts will come together. I have felt excited by finding and making links across theory and practice, and listening to people telling their stories. I have felt frustrated when I have thought that my approach has not always drawn out people's stories fully. Angry with myself when I feel I am not getting deep enough into the data, when other commitments get in the way and when I find it hard to remember details about theories and facts. I have at times found it hard to move from project worker to researcher, from the language of policy discourse and evaluation to research analysis. But there are things which have kept me going through the process, such as the people I am researching, encouragement from my family, having some friends who understand because they are doing something similar or have gone through the process, having support, encouragement and detailed feedback from my supervisor, wanting to finish something that I have started and knowing that I would feel very disappointed in myself if I gave up, together with the drive to prove to myself and others that I can do it.

It has been interesting to observe my learning through the process both of carrying out the research but also through being involved in the Project. Through the interviews and observations I have been very aware of changes in my confidence and a sense of achievement. However, this has not been linear; I have shifted often from feeling clear about what I am doing, to feeling that it is unachievable. But the most powerful aspect has been learning through experience and discussion, listening to different opinions, and then having to concretise, put into words or see situations through. I have been

aware at times that questions and dilemmas seem to go round and round without a sense of getting to a conclusion and perhaps this is most evident when I personally have not been open to learning, wanting to see the issue from 'my perspective'.

In the process I have not suddenly transformed into a researcher, but I have been learning about the subject, using knowledge and practical skills, discussing and having to explain my research. Slowly it becomes part of what I do, how I think, question, and interrogate myself. Learning can also be very painful, requiring perseverance and a view of the long term or greater purpose for undertaking it, to be able to have the resilience and determination to keep going. These are all important points to think about in relation to the learning experiences for young people.

Conclusion

This chapter has used detailed introductions of some of the different people involved in the Project to provide an insight into the learning processes and interactions. It has allowed me to look at exactly how individuals feel about their own experiences. These stories connect with the findings from the literature which indicate that learning is complex and needs to be relevant to the lives, interests and expectations of those taking part. It appears that for the greatest impact on individuals, learning needs to be dynamic and flexible, with participants actively involved, as well as having currency in the 'real world'. Learning is acknowledged, confirmed and strengthened by externalising it in some way, through telling others about it, and putting it into use in some way.

Formal learning can constrain the way in which we see the process of learning. Where outcomes are too tightly defined at the start we can restrict what learning might come out of the experience and therefore exclude often very significant learning that takes place. The unexpected and surprising elements of learning can be missed. The recent

move towards funding for learning for young people through the 'Young People's Learning Alliance' (YPLA) which is more 'outcome' focussed, requiring qualification outcomes means that the tension between informal learning approaches and outcome requirements will become more difficult to balance. The product (qualification and outcome focus) will have a greater hold than the process of learning, where the outcomes are more flexible depending on the needs of the young people.

The role of the adults, youth workers, and facilitators involved in the process is also important. In formal learning they are often much more focussed on providing knowledge or skills. In a more informal setting where the process of learning is important their role is often more as facilitators or mentors, supporting self reflection, questioning, holding boundaries and encouraging young people to take responsibility.

The Project has a very distinctive approach to learning. The process of developing self confidence, self reflection and resilience are at the centre, through a mentoring approach. Learning happens across all aspects of the Project and the skills of the staff are to find ways to capture this through conversation, discussion, photographs, digital recordings as well as through written documentation. The Project works very practically with the young people to develop confidence, skills, attitude, knowledge and most importantly self reflection, so that they have the skills to learn from any future experience if they chose to.

In the next chapter I look at the methodological issues that emerged in developing an ethnographic and participatory approach to researching this youth and community project.

In Section two I come back to explore some of the key themes drawn from the relevant literature and the policy context and I use these to help frame my analysis of the data collected through the research process. I use the key themes of informal and formal learning, concepts of community, intergenerational learning, and developing identities through transitions to work to explore the literature and analyse the data.

Chapter 4

Methodology and ethical concerns

My research journey

My research journey has involved many changes in focus, crisis of confidence and critical reflection. As with any learning context, the process of research is complex and requires many shifts and subtle re-examinations. This is not simply because the time scale over four years means that the context and external influences on me have been altering all the time, but also the very reasons for starting the research have often been overtaken by other factors. My initial idea when I embarked on this study was to research a topic related to my job, as I thought that, working in the same field would make it easier to focus on the research and access appropriate data. However I found that the reverse was true and that it was very hard to keep clarity around the boundaries between the work I was doing on specific projects, my organisation's requirements and the research itself. I struggled with the conflicting demands of funders, policy, the organisation and my research.

In my second year I felt able to carry out a defined piece of work into multi -agency working, I felt more able to interpret and reflect when freed from the constraints and power imbalance of being both researcher and project manager. I was asked to use my research project to write and present a paper for an academic conference. This process was very useful and the discussions that came from the workshop fed back in to a topic paper and to the project itself. It was soon after this that I made the decision to change my research topic to one that was outside and separate from my work situation. As a result I decided to research the Project, a small youth and community project, and an area I was very interested and involved in. I focussed on the processes of learning related to the Project and how the Project affected the people involved, including myself as a researcher and facilitator. In my journal I reflect on why I began to move from my initial ideas:

‘One reason for changing to a more participatory approach was to try and put myself in a position of analysing my own preconceived ideas and beliefs, to put myself clearly in a position to follow my own journey.’ Research journal July 2008

Methodology

Although at this stage, I had some knowledge of the debates about qualitative and quantitative research and the different methodological approaches, I still had some notion of the research being ‘separate’ from the researcher. At the start of the research I explored a range of methods and methodologies. As Stenhouse (1980) highlights, the whole research process is part of the learning. I decided that I would build up a case study of the Project, drawing on different research approaches particularly ethnography and participatory research. Using an ethnographic approach involved gathering data from a range of sources such as informal interviews, conversations, and generally using day to day observations to develop a thick description of the learning processes. In comparison, the participatory approach required greater incorporation of reflection and dialogue to support my role as an insider and as a facilitator of change within the Project. While very different and sometimes contradictory approaches I felt that using a descriptive approach to build a case study would provide insights and a richness of data that I could then work through with the people in the Project and take forward with a participatory research approach. This active participatory approach in the Project I felt would provide opportunities for supporting participants to take a more active role, and to feed in to supporting change and developments in the Project itself. I discussed the research idea with two of the directors, and shared my proposal. They were keen for the research to focus on the Project and feed back into it. Unlike the other areas I had explored, I did not feel a burden or pressure to produce anything or to meet specific milestones apart from those I set myself for the research. The fact that the subject for the research was not part of my ‘paid work’ also freed me up to explore in a less restricted way.

My decision to construct a case study of the Project

I was aware that the process of collecting and recording the data and constructing the case would involve an enormous amount of learning about myself, the case and about the research process itself. I chose to construct a case study of the Project because I felt it would make it possible to look in depth at relationships and processes, and to deal with the details and complexities of social situations. I explored some of the different features of case study. Denscombe (2003) identifies some key features of case studies; they create a 'spotlight on one instance', to illuminate the general by looking at the particular; they look in-depth at the 'case', enabling a different way of investigating the subject; they can 'focus on relationships'. It was this holistic perspective and focus on the depth and complexities of the way the different parts within the case interacted, that I wanted to explore in this research. I felt that building an ethnographic case study of the Project, the young people, and the local community involved at a particular time in its development, would provide a richness of data such as that described by Ellen:

... 'each case study is a description of a specific configuration of events in which some distinctive set of actors have been involved in some defined situation at some particular point of time'. (Ellen, 1984: 237)

For my research the actors were people closely involved in the Project, including myself as researcher and insider. The 'point of time' for my research would span the years I carried out the study and the 'defined situation' was the Project itself. I would highlight the fact that the actors are not only 'distinctive', as Ellen describes, but also they bring with them different perspectives which impact on the situation. I was aware that constructing the case would involve a wide range of methods and that one of the strengths of a case study approach is that it enables the researcher to use many different sources and types of data. It was this breadth of methodology and range of different types of data that I felt would enable me to construct an in-depth picture of

the Project, the relationships and process of learning as identified by Hammersley (1992). I also felt this would provide an opportunity to collect the richness and depth of description that Stake (1994) describes.

Boundaries of the case study

In deciding the boundaries of my case study of the Project, I had to consider who the key players were and how they would contribute to the direction of the study. At times I considered interviewing other organisations and professionals involved on the periphery, but decided that this would make the scope and boundaries too broad. I would agree with Stake (1995) who argues that while it is important to follow where the case leads having some boundaries can be useful for clarifying the case. In the end I decided to include not only the young people, staff, and volunteers, but also some of the key members of the local community who were interacting with the Project. This goes against the idea of very clear boundaries of a case (Carr and Kemmis 1986) and Platt (1988) who refers to the concept of a 'bounded system' where the boundaries of the 'case' are clearly defined. However, I would argue that it is not always possible to have clear boundaries and that sometimes it is important to allow incidents outside of the boundary to be taken into consideration. For example when unexpected situations occur which were not planned or foreseen, but that could throw more light on the research, a decision has to be made about how much the case can be or should be extended.

In my research I found that this was very true. During the data collection and writing up, a number of situations occurred and I have had to make decisions at each stage as to what to include and what to exclude. Initially I planned and undertook a number of interviews and attended and included a sample of observations of events and meetings from different aspects of the Project, for example the young people's group, the community group, and the Project meetings. As the research developed and I took part in and observed more activities, events and encounters, I increasingly identified critical

incidents and unexpected interactions which, I felt, provided insights into the processes within the Project, but which were not included within the initial boundaries of the case study.

Clearly I could not write about all the different events, activities and interactions that took place at the Project over the time of my research, but certain incidents highlighted and gave different perspectives to the analysis. The decisions about what to include, who to include as well as deciding when to stop collecting data have not been easy. Almost all the situations would throw some new light on the case, and as I have been involved in the Project, I have seen many of them first-hand. Sometimes just at the point of deciding the data collecting had finished, something else happened that seemed very relevant, as a result the research was often spontaneous and responsive.

Selection of the case

I drew on discussion within the literature to decide how and for what purpose to select the case. Stake (1994) identifies three main types of case study research. The first he terms the 'intrinsic' case study, which involves the desire to gain a better understanding of something of interest. He also talks about the 'instrumental' case study, where the case is chosen to give particular insight into an issue. The third type that Stake identifies is the 'collective' case study where a number of cases are selected to provide insight into a particular issue or phenomenon. Here the aim is to increase understanding and can be used to develop theories and generalisations (Stake 1994). For this research I chose the case both because it was intrinsically interesting and because it might give more insight into the learning process for those involved with the Project and therefore inform the Project in planning and reviewing how it worked.

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) identify different approaches to the selection of a case. Firstly a case may be selected because it is typical, an approach which is often

defended because the findings from the case study can be generalised. Secondly, a case is sometimes selected because it demonstrates a contrast to the typical; it could be an example of something that is very different to what would be expected and can be used to demonstrate the contrast. Thirdly, the least likely case may be chosen so that a theory can be tested to see if it happens in a situation where it is least expected and it is argued that evidence found in this circumstance can have all the more credibility (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). I selected the Project as an example of a small youth and community project where there is a focus on learning, it was interesting and it was, I felt, similar to other projects.

In exploring the literature around the different ways case studies are used, I decided to build a case of the Project for several reasons related to the above ideas: it was typical of a small voluntary sector organisation, it was working with young people who have found it difficult to engage with learning in other settings, my internal role in the project could provide data from different perspectives, and also it was 'intrinsically interesting' (Denzin 1994:34). As a reason for selection, on its own, I felt that being intrinsically interesting would not be a robust justification for the choice. I also chose to research this project because it was similar to other projects working in a local community with young people, from which it would be possible to identify some aspects that would have resonance to other projects.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed the grounded theory approach identifying the importance not only of concepts coming from the data itself but also to analyse and generate theories from the data. Mason (1996) draws on this and talks about the importance of 'theoretical sampling' which involves selecting cases to study with an emphasis on their 'relevance to your research questions, your theoretical position and most importantly the explanation or account which you are developing.' This also involves selecting cases which are 'deviant' or do not fit the theory well, an approach examined by Denzin and Lincoln (1994), as noted earlier. Mason (1996) also describes choosing a kind of sample, which can represent a wider population by selecting a sample of particular 'processes, types, categories or examples which are relevant to or

appear within the wider universe.’ (Mason 1996: 92). These could, for example, be a collective whole like an organisation, a document or a conversation as in Lamb et al. (2007). In my research I chose to take an in-depth look at one project which had specific relevance to both my research questions (outlined in Chapter 1) and my approach; looking at the learning processes in a work setting. My case study will hopefully, have relevance to other projects and programmes working with young people in similar situations.

Uses of case study

Case studies can be used in a variety of ways, although two dominant uses seem to stand out from the literature. Gluckman (1961) talks about using detailed analyses of social processes, which he claims can help reveal the complexity and context of daily life. This was developed further by Lacey (1970) and Hargreaves (1967) who went on to establish the use of case studies in educational settings. This seems in contrast to the notion of a case study which describes a simple event or action, often used to illustrate a particular point (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). There is also a lot of discussion around generalising from case studies (Hammersley 1992). My research was not going to provide a comparative approach where similarities and differences across a number of situations can be observed and analysed. I was not planning to look at a large enough sample to set a typology of types of cases from which one would select a range of different cases from each type. However, as an example of a case, my research could provide insights and might have similarities with other ‘cases’.

Reducing bias and increasing reflexivity

I next looked at how to try to ensure bias was minimised and reflexivity was maximised.

There were three key areas that I had to think about in relation to this. Firstly, how to check that my case studies of individuals was a fair and reasonable representation of what they had said and how they felt, and secondly that my research was not being influenced too heavily either by myself or by external sources. One way of ensuring this was to check the interview transcripts with participants as the research was written up. However, this has many pitfalls and dilemmas in itself. The majority of the people included in my research did not have strong literacy skills and lacked confidence. There is also the question about when to check with participants, as the process of data collection, analysis and representation takes time, so I had to consider when to check back with them. I have done this as an ongoing process, talking through, reading the case studies with the participants, wherever possible and revising to incorporate and respond to their perspectives or concerns.

Secondly, I was aware of the bias I could have as an individual involved in the Project to see it in a positive light, as well as the potential pressure from those around me to provide a positive and successful image of the Project. This was something that I had to repeatedly come back to and critique, to try to minimise the potential bias. To counteract this I had feedback from my supervisor and others outside of the project to provide me with alternative perspectives as I analysed and explored the literature.

Thirdly, although this research was not commissioned by policy makers, the findings have contributed to policy documents. The questions of how much control 'others' have over what is to be researched, what methods are used and how the information is to be presented, or if it is to be published, have not been so relevant to this research. Despite this, in relation to its contribution to policy documents, other research and to local 'case studies' for funders, I had to consider the ethos of the project, and the voices of staff, young people and the local community as it could have had effects on future funding, and prompt certain reactions and responses to the material provided. Taking these factors into account I have used a variety of methods to collect data to give some validation of results, and I have drawn together information from a fairly wide range of participants involved in the project to try to crystallise findings.

Case study from the perspective of a participant

As a practitioner working in the field, I brought with me my own clear viewpoint of the situation and also the wider perspective; I had existing views on what I felt should happen in policy and practice. I have tried to limit my personal viewpoint and bias by interviewing a range of people from across the organisation to build up the 'case' from a range of different perspectives. This brought with it the need to look at aspects of generalisation. Although the research did not set out to generalise, it is certainly possible that people in other similar settings might recognise at least part of themselves in the case studies. This is in contrast to the use of case studies in many policy documents which are often limited to short extracts of comments or snippets of stories, to illustrate particular points and often give a positive bias to demonstrate success. Rather than traditional case study research, they are more examples of differing viewpoints, and it is often difficult to know how representative they are of the situation or of the 'voice' of the contributor. By including larger "chunks" of ideas and opinions given by each contributor, I hoped to build a profile and wider viewpoint of each individual I wanted to develop a much richer description of the Project and the participants.

Drawing on ethnographic and participatory approaches

I chose to draw on two different and sometimes contradictory traditions of research, namely those relating to the ethnographic and participatory approaches. I wanted to take an 'activist' role, using reflection to develop an understanding of the context but also of myself, where as researcher, I did not see myself as 'expert'. Through taking a participatory approach at times I took on the role of facilitator, using dialogue to understand and reflect with those participating and where appropriate to support

changes. In contrast to an ethnographic approach the participatory approach required me to challenge the notion of separateness of researcher from researched. However alongside this, I felt that using ethnographic methods of informal interviews and observation to gather data would provide a depth of description.

Criticisms of participatory approaches have included the issue that it can be used simply as a way of giving legitimacy to research (Richards 1995; Mohan 1999). I was very aware that I wanted to ensure that the people participating were able to contribute fully and that their voices were clearly heard and that actions and developments identified were taken forward. However, I was also very aware, from the beginning, that it would be challenging not to influence the analysis through my own assumptions and viewpoint.

In this research I took a descriptive and documentary approach to case study, acknowledging the different perspectives and the complexities of gathering data, using informal interviews, conversations, observations and interactions to build up a 'thick' description and to allow the voice of the participants to speak for themselves. Using different 'voices' in the text, those of the young people, the members of the local community and staff as well as my voice from the perspective of a researcher, a participant observer, a facilitator, project worker, reflective practitioner and from a policy perspective to build a rich 'ethnographic' text. An ethnographic research approach, like other qualitative approaches involves the researcher being immersed in the subject they are researching, being a 'human instrument' (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 187). The researcher aims to develop knowledge through a range of methods including: interviews, observations, discussions etc. This approach meant that as a participant observer I could be responsive and adaptable, and build up a detailed picture of the Project (Cohen et al. 2000).

In my research I also draw on participatory and action orientated research approaches. As a facilitator in the Project I brought people together for events and meetings, encouraging participants to take part and contribute to reflecting on their journey and on planning actions. For example in the young people's group and the community

meetings, bringing them together, supporting a format where people were able to contribute and supporting follow up actions. Both in collecting the data and in writing up I wanted to ensure that the 'voices' of participants particularly those who were least confident or marginalised, were captured and represented. I have tried to let them 'tell' their stories and speak for themselves as far as possible through the text.

The issue of bias and representation have been much debated, Becker (1967) raised this in 'Whose Side Are We On?' arguing that researchers cannot be disconnected and need rather to decide if they are on the side of the researcher or researched. This stance was much critiqued by Gouldner (1975) who argued that it is when the researcher has a different perspective to the participants that it is possible to 'do justice to their standpoint.' (Gouldner 1975: 56-57). These debates about participant the power balance between researcher and researched have continued. Pain (2003) raises an interesting related point about participatory research, she believes that it is important to question who research is for; is it to represent and empower people who are marginalised or is it to support those more powerful groups. This dilemma runs through many research approaches, and the power balance between top down and bottom up research is much debated (Blomley 1994; Tickell 1995). In my research I wanted the participants' voice to speak for itself and to focus on practice and process, telling a story about every day events. Elliott (1991) identifies the key aim of action research as being 'to improve practice rather than to produce knowledge' (Elliott, 1991:49). Schön (1983 and 1987) talks about the importance of 'reflective practice' reflecting both on process and product in a particular context. These are all important elements within my research journey and it goes back to the point Pain raises about questioning and being honest about who research is for, for those being researched, the researcher, practitioner researcher or to influence others.

Being immersed in a situation you are studying is open to the criticism of subjectivity. I realised how important it was to recognise and acknowledge each person's view point, that there are multiple realities, and that representation of these is very important. Other important criticisms to be aware of whilst carrying out this research include: by

their very presence the researcher changes the situation they are researching and the researcher can represent data selectively to 'demonstrate a particular point'. With these in mind I still felt that I wanted to explore the case of the Project as an insider; immersing myself in the subject to be studied, focussing on the common place, giving voice to what is often unseen while being aware of the pitfalls of the criticisms of subjectivity influencing the observed, and biased representation while at the same acknowledging my role as facilitator. I drew on ethnography to develop the text, using thick descriptions and using different voices to build the case study from a multiplicity of perspectives and a Participatory Research approach to take forward the actions initiated by my research.

Research activities

Following the proposal being accepted I drew up an interview schedule for the more formal gathering of data. I also started to keep a research diary to capture observations, thoughts, and ideas as the research develops. I wrote some interview guidelines which I intended to use to frame semi- structured interviews. I also set up an initial interview to test out the questions.

I undertook 29 interviews between September 2008 and May 2010, a total of 21 people were interviewed, eight were interviewed twice and the remaining thirteen interviewed once. Of these 11 were young people drawn from the core group of 50 who had attended between 2005 and 2010; the five members of staff involved in the Project at the time; and five members of the community most closely involved with the Project in this period. I tried to make sure people felt able to refuse to take part, opt out at any point and or contribute in a way they felt most comfortable with. They could chose the time, place for the interview and therefore if they did not turn up they were making a choice not to take part. I explained to each participant what the research was about; gave them the participant consent form and checked if there was any objection

to recording the interview. Despite doing all of this I was aware all the time, that however you explain something; the complexities of the research process and the implications about how it may eventually be written up and where or how it may be presented are not necessarily fully understood. I am not sure at the start that I fully understood all this myself. On top of this presenting and explaining the information in written form raises a myriad of issues. This Included; the importance we give to written documents, the power relationship of a formal written document with a named academic institution, and the level of literacy skills of those taking part who relied on my interpretation for understanding the meaning.

For some of the interviews the project staff were the intermediaries, checking first if people wanted to take part. Using an intermediary for the initial contact, on the one hand gave a way out for people, but it also meant that the initial information was being relayed by someone else and therefore another interpretation/ explanation could be given. In my initial pilot interview I meticulously used all of my prepared questions. What I found was that in answering the questions a lot of information about the person's 'story' was being left out. I think that we both felt the pressure of the digital recorder and getting answers to all the questions. I decided on the next one to ask more open ended questions and allow the person to 'tell their story'. I found this worked more and in subsequent interviews I was much more relaxed and open. However the recorder did create, in almost all the interviews, an added pressure. And in one or two, when it was turned off, the participant noticeably relaxed and gave what appeared to be more 'honest' information 'off the record'. At times I was aware that some people were trying to give me the information they thought I 'wanted' which added another challenging aspect to the data collection.

Alongside the interviews I was involved with 55 events, activities and meetings related to the Project, between September 2008 and November 2010. These included: the young people's group, community meetings, preparation for and the official opening, Annual General meetings, community events, workshops with staff, volunteers and young people, Arts festivals and open days. I helped to plan and facilitate the first

formal project planning meeting with staff, volunteers and young people, and was thus able to observe first-hand the relationships and decision making processes. This dual role of facilitator and researcher I found difficult to balance, and there were tensions between taking an active role, encouraging and making things happen, and the role of participant observer. However, taking on these dual roles and approaches I felt also meant that I could record and use a wide range of information, including being part of the above events and meetings, taking an active role as well as recording more fleeting conversations and observations. I went on to carry out the interviews, and took part in further events. I transcribed the interviews and typed up notes of meetings and observations. Then I went through these identifying key themes, I did this initially by highlighting key words and phrases, grouping these and cutting and pasting sections to bring together the main aspects of consensus and identifying areas of contradiction. As I continued to gather data I added these and arrived at the key themes in my thesis.

Ethical considerations

‘We do not come innocent to a task or a situation of events; rather we wilfully situate those events not merely in the institutional meanings which our profession provides but also, and in the same moment, we constitute them as expressions of our selves. Inevitably, the traces of our own psychic and social history drive us.’ (Clough, 1995: 138)

As Clough points out we bring with us our own perspective, bringing with it the imprint of our background and history, something that is immensely important to acknowledge and recognise when carrying out research. There are many ethical questions which need to be considered in this research. Firstly those issues arising from my role both as a researcher, as one of the project initiators, as well as being married to one of the directors. I did recognise at the start that there could be real difficulties in the power imbalances within a small organisation, and the pressure people might feel to take

part, as I note in my research journal: 'There is clearly a danger that in a small organisation the relationships of power may well inhibit people from saying what they really feel and there may be concern about breaking confidences and allegiances.'

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Due to my role and connections with the Project I had to be very aware of participants' perceptions of me and my research. For the young people, how much power did they feel they had to refuse to take part in the research? It is not very often that a young person feels confident and is articulate enough to challenge an adult who is in a position of power. The same is true for some members of the community who had missed out on developing literacy skills, for them the concern perhaps, of what the Project staff might think, might be less, but there could be concern about sharing with me their difficulty reading the text and therefore influencing the final product .

I also tried to minimise bias and misrepresentation through checking with participants, wherever possible, as the research was written up, and thus keeping them involved. However this was not always possible as some moved away or could not be contacted. But with my involvement and insider role within the Project, was it really possible to have a level playing field of power? I tried to ensure that all participants had the opportunity to say what they felt about the Project; that their voices were reflected in the representation of the research. I did this partly through the informal interviews and observations, collecting data from a range of situations where participants felt relaxed, providing informal opportunities, and also through presenting their stories; letting them speak for themselves in their own words. I started by thinking that I could anonymise the data while offering people the choice, that if someone very specifically wanted to use their real name, they could as long as it did not jeopardise the anonymity of other participants. However I realised that the Project is well known in the area and in describing the Project many people would be able to recognise it and possibly some of the voices within it. To try to ameliorate this I have changed the name of the project, names of participants and altered some of the details. It could be a small project anywhere in England.

My double role as insider/outsider

It is important to reflect on how my role as an insider has affected the research, the way in which I have gained access to information, how I have represented that information and the particular ways in which I have represented people and their voices. Using ethnographic and participatory research approaches, being personally involved in the project has enabled me to gain additional insider information, but this has also inevitably provided greater opportunity for bias and the representation of my own reading of the situation.

Hannon talks about how research interacts with all aspects of community and life (Hannon 1998 in Clough and Nutbrown 2007) it is not something detached. The first hand experiences and opportunities for observation and reflection that are provided through ethnographic and action research approaches give access to data and perspectives that other research methods do not (Patton 1990; Cohen et al. 2000). However, it also lays the researcher open to the criticism of reflecting a specific perspective and it highlights the importance of critical reflection and questioning: '....the informed researcher's voice no longer provides an authoritarian monologue but contributes a part to dialogue' (Mitchell 1993:55).

My multi- faceted involvement in the Project has inevitably given me information which would not be accessible to an outside researcher and I am going to explore some of the ethical issues which I have considered, and have caused some tensions, conflict and potential bias. The complexity of my involvement and roles and relationships within and outside the Project that potentially impact on the research cannot be simply explained. All those involved in the research will have their own 'take' on this and will make their responses to me and my research questions on a basis of their understanding both of the Project, the research and how I might interpret, present and use that information.

Have I been able to find ways of representing each person's own voice, without my voice being represented as that of others throughout? What have I done to try to ameliorate this? And what could I have done differently? I have reflected a lot on these questions and the ethical issues of how, as researcher I may have influenced and changed the situation, the data, and its representation. I have been clear to those involved that I am carrying out this research and so people have the opportunity to be very clear about what they want to say about their perspective. But as the researcher, for whom the research has been and always will be an evolving process, how could I have represented clearly to the participants what I was doing, when at the start I was not always clear myself?

Firstly, let me look at who the people are that I am trying to represent. I must be clear about the differences between my relationships and how that might affect the way in which each of them will have reacted with me and I with them. With each young person participating, I explained what I was doing, the process and what was written in the information about participating that they signed. None of them chose to decline or to question further how I might use or represent this information. For most of the young people in the Project I am probably more an 'outsider' because I am not directly involved with them and their work on a day to day basis. They see me sometimes helping at events, they know my relationship to Paul and for some I have participated in meetings that they have been involved in. This brings with it issues about people's confusion over my roles as researcher, facilitator and participant.

For the community, I am someone who is involved in the Project and helping at many of the events. They are not particularly aware of the background work, the fund raising etc that I have been involved with or with my connection to Paul. Does this matter? At one of the weekend events we ran, to bring the local community in to the Project, this lack of awareness was brought to my focus when I was showing someone around. She had come to an event about a year before and was talking about someone she had spoken to about the Project. When I said, it was probably Paul my husband, who she had spoken to, she immediately said, 'I better be careful about what I say then.'

Knowing about how people are related through relationships clearly makes us feel more or less able to say what we think and to express our views openly.

If this is true of a member of the community who had little reason to be concerned about how I might interpret her views, what about those more closely involved and with most vested interest? For the staff, I am the wife of the project manager and I have been involved in and helped run meetings and events, and for the two people employed by the Project would also be very aware of my 'insider' knowledge. How likely is it that they would feel able or would choose to be open in their comments? They may have chosen to give what they think I would want to hear, or what they want me to hear, knowing that this may well get back to Paul. For one member of staff, who had left because he was not altogether happy with his role in the Project, knowing my insider role, he would inevitably feel guarded about his responses to the questions. In fact it was only at the very end of my interview with him, when I turned off the digital recorder, that I could see him physically relax.

George, as a professional in Youth and Community work, is very aware of the way in which projects need to be presented to others, that you put a 'positive spin' on processes and outcomes. When I interviewed him for the research he was more wary than others of how information can be interpreted and presented, and therefore possibly gave me more fully developed and 'presentable' answers. When we had an interruption in the interview, and I had to go to the other side of the room to sort it out, he said 'I'll keep going', and talked on aware that the digital recorder would continue recording, even if I wasn't giving my full attention. Finally, with Paul, we were involved in the very first discussions and decisions about the Project. As a professional in youth and community work; and as a director and manager of the Project, he is aware of the importance of presenting a positive perspective. There is a vested interest in the most acceptable and positive outcomes being represented and not any of the doubts, difficulties and tensions, which could be in conflict to the research outcomes.

To contrast these potential issues and problems with being an insider I think that it is

also important to recognise the additional rich sources of information this insider position brings that would not be available to an 'outside' researcher. There have been greater sources of information which I have been able to tap into and absorb on a daily basis, which have contributed to my understanding and representation.

My double role as researcher/ activist

My relationship with myself in my different roles is also important to consider: like the others involved with the Project, as an insider, I would want the 'outside' world to see something positive and not give ammunition to those who would want to see it fail, or to pick holes in it. Yet I am also, as a researcher there to represent the different voices of those involved and therefore these may well be very different from my own perspective and may not always be positive. I have to be aware of the potential tensions between someone who is involved and interested in seeing the Project develop and move forward, and that of the reflexive researcher. The two are not incompatible but there are tensions for myself and for others in the Project. I have tried to reflect on these tensions as they have presented themselves and to make sure the perspectives of all the participants are represented and the picture is of the whole project, not just the positive aspects.

Another key aspect that requires consideration is the importance of finding ways to question my assumptions and perspectives, to enable the research to be reflective, look at the everyday in different lights and looking at and be explicit about the way in which as a researcher I am constructing 'reality' from the text (Walford et al. 1991; Vulliamy and Webb 1992; and Clough and Barton 1995).

Stanley and Wise (1993), argue for the legitimisation of personal involvement in research: 'we emphasise that all research involves, as its basis, an interaction, a relationship between researchers and researched....' (Stanley and Wise 1993:161).

Michael Oakeshott (1933) describes the way in which research can be a way of seeing events in this fresh light, by questioning assumptions he describes it as an 'arrest of experience'. For me this has very close ties with the creative process; when working on a painting I try to see with fresh eyes, to find ways to trick myself into viewing it from other perspectives, sometimes this can be through talking to others about what they see, but also from a glance, or putting it in another context. So this was something that I tried to do with the research as I collected information and interpreted it.

Text as representation

There are issues related to the balance of power in this situation and in the act itself of re-reading and changing text. For some of the young people, community members and staff there are issues of lack of literacy skills, they may well feel it is difficult to challenge something that is written and it brings into question the reliance on the written text for the representation of the data.

I question if it is possible to ensure that there is not an imbalance of power between researcher and researched. How could the young people 'fully understand' what the research was; when in reality I did not 'fully understand' myself, at the start, and what it was or it would involve. For the young people involved in the Project, they are involved because they have found it difficult to engage with education or training, what would their experience tell them about someone 'doing research' what would that mean to them? When I explained to them, often on a one to one basis, using terminology I felt would enable them to understand the overarching aims, and to portray me as a researcher who wanted to hear their story, they wanted to take part, to tell their story. But for many of them, their understanding of further and higher education is fairly hazy. So, the fact that I am doing a Doctorate, would have either represented something very uninteresting and academic, or given me some kind of vague and unwritten authority. The only young person to ask any questions about what

I was doing had a mother who has gone on to Higher Education and therefore had something to gauge it against. He asked, 'Is that something like an MA?' my response was 'yes, just a few more words'. How much detail should I have gone in to? When explaining to those taking part in the research I have tried to explain clearly the process involved, from interviewing and them being able to stop at any time, transcribing their words. I explained that they would see the transcript and have a chance to change it, but the research process is complex and takes time and my experience of doing this in the other research I carried out showed that people react differently to the act of going over their words from an interview that has been transcribed. Some find it boring or uninteresting whilst others may experience feelings of disbelief that what has been written down represents their words. Another point to note is the fact that it is only the words that can be transcribed rather than the unsaid and unseen meanings conveyed in a conversation or interview means that all the missing information which had been portrayed, through gesture, eye movement and body language is not represented by the words. Also when the initial interview has been transcribed and analysed, it is then cut apart, like a collage and used in ways that would not be immediately recognisable. Looking at these factors, is it possible to constantly take the information back and check that the real meaning has been conveyed?

I have tried to represent the stories of the young people and members of the community, to allow their words and messages to come through, both from the direct spoken words from the transcripts and from the unstated clues and observations. After working on the stories, checking and re-checking to make sure the essence of the interviews and data were there, without giving away the identity of the interviewees, changing the names and some details, I went back to the participants, wherever possible and read through with them, to check that they were happy with the information included. However, I did not specifically set out to involve participants in the research agenda, as is the aim of participatory research. Rather I sought more to ensure that the research led directly into action, and that participants were able to contribute to this, seeing their contributions acted upon and being involved in these.

Conclusion

The approach outlined enabled me to explore the day to day interactions of the Project, the people involved and have hoped to highlight the voices and stories of those involved, including young people, staff, volunteers and the local community to increase understanding of the experience of young people moving towards adult hood, training and work and so ultimately give the Project time to reflect on and to improve practice.

The research process has highlighted for me some of the key issues, challenges and benefits of using these approaches in gathering the data to build a case study. The process has made me more reflective, to push the boundaries exploring new methods and approaches and questioning my own assumptions. I have become very aware of the importance of voice in research, and that developing an ongoing dialogue with participants helps the process of checking and re-checking meaning particularly when representing young people. As Fine (1994) points out 'Researchers cannot write about/ with/ through adults' (or adolescents') voices as if the researchers had 'said it all' (Fine, 1994:22). I would agree with Fine that it is important to let the voice of the 'researched' speak for itself, not representing it as if it has come from the researcher and I have tried to do this through their stories and through reflection about the process. However, it is important to acknowledge that by making choices about what to include and what to leave out and how to represent their voices I am inevitably making choices and therefore 'speaking' for them.

I recognised how important the whole research process was, from gathering the data, drafting, checking with participants if they are comfortable with their representation through to having the research printed, seen, and critiqued by others, thus making public the private. Research needs to be seen and read by others to legitimise and validate it as Stenhouse (1975) highlights. From an action orientated approach I have also considered my moral responsibility to follow through and support any changes

that might occur from the process of the research. My ongoing involvement with, and commitment to, the Project means that I will be in a position to continue to support any changes now that the research for the thesis is completed. This dual approach makes this research different from an ethnographic case study, in that I am committed to taking forward the actions, continuing in my role as facilitator to support change.

Preface to Section Two

In Section two I will explore the four key themes, which have emerged through literature reviews and the data collected in the research process and which underpin my overarching research question about the process of learning for people involved in the Project. Chapter five looks at formal and informal learning, the differences and similarities and how these impact on people's lives. Chapter six looks at concepts of community. In Chapter seven I look at the theme of intergenerational learning and its place in the project and the links with the local community. Chapter eight looks at transitions and identity: how young people develop personal and professional identities, and the transition to adult hood and the world of work. In Chapter nine I explore the conclusions from analysis of the data and literature, reflect on the process, the impact on the project and myself and the contribution to research and policy in this area.

Chapter 5 Catching the learning. Definitions and experiences

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the central theme of my research and one that clearly emerged from the research data and research process; that of learning. I look at the key processes of learning related to the Project not only for young people, but also for staff, members of the local community involved and for myself as a researcher. I will discuss a wide range of aspects that I have identified through research on the Project.

I would like briefly to reflect on my own learning, as I have undertaken this Doctorate of Education to help understand the process myself and others go through. When I first considered signing up to apply to do a Doctorate in Education, I discussed it with several people. I looked at the information from several different Universities on different courses, and I remember in particular one person I talked to about what I was thinking of doing. She said, 'Just stop talking about it and if you're going to do it, get on with it.' Although I was a bit taken aback, this pushed me into applying. I did not really know what I was getting in to, but saw it as a personal challenge. I had never seen myself as 'academic', at school I had not found academic work easy, and had to work hard. Unlike many of the young people at the Project, my experience of formal learning, while not easy, has mainly been positive. I have successfully completed courses, achieved qualifications and had support of family and friends.

Even so, I have gone through a huge range of emotions, felt I had grasped understanding of theories and concepts, and then felt I had lost them again. I had been in formal lectures, seminars, tutorials and in informal learning situations, discussing with colleagues on the course, one to one, reading and talking with friends and colleagues. Through my experiences, I have been on the brink of giving up but have been persuaded to continue. For some reason, my desire to continue and see it

through must have outweighed my desire not to do so.

Learning is complex (Unwin et al. 2009) and although in education we spend our time trying to measure and prove progress, there are many aspects which remain intangible and possibly always will. The more I have read around the subject, observed, interviewed and discussed, the more elusive some aspects of learning have become. When is the yoga class I attend, learning or for maintaining skills? When is the thinking about my thesis on my cycle ride in the mornings, consolidating learning or keeping healthy? When is the brief conversation with a friend, informal learning or conversation? On the one hand there are the tangible skills and knowledge which we can sometimes measure, and on the other there are also the less tangible shifts in attitude, confidence etc which are much harder to grasp. Even with the more tangible aspects, when can we say we have learned something or “completed” a learning process?

In the following sections I am going to start by looking at the literature, identify some key concepts and then explore some of the different aspects of learning that come through analysis of the research data. I will begin by exploring some of the key literature around defining 'learning' as a concept.

What is learning?

In this section I will discuss some of the definitions of learning and some of the complications that these can bring with them.

Learning is a term used everywhere and can allude to learning in every context and degree of formality and informality, accidental and deliberate. It is something that happens to all of us all of the time, and yet it can also be used to refer to very specific aspects and contexts. The definition given by the Oxford English Dictionary is:

“(possession of) Knowledge got by study, especially of language or literature or history as subjects of systematic investigation” (OED 1976:616)

This narrow definition excludes, what I think are the myriads of ‘moments’ of learning, when something suddenly clicks in to place or something heard, seen, experienced or read, makes sense. The definition implies that formal, academic study is the only relevant form of learning. I am going to explore what we mean by the terms ‘formal’, ‘informal’ and ‘non-formal’ learning. In the world of education the merits and disadvantages of formal and other types of learning have been much debated (Beckett and Hager 2002; Rogers 2004; Schuller and Watson 2009; Schuetze 2006). Formal, ‘academic’ learning is often seen as being more important, or of a higher status than informal or non-formal learning (Bernstein 1971). Through my research experience, and reflection on my own learning and the learning of others, I would argue that these hierarchical distinctions between different types of learning are not helpful. Billett (2001a) and Colley (2003) suggest that all types of learning have formal and informal characteristics.

Formal learning is often seen as what happens in schools, colleges and universities. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) argue that it is situated in and reinforces and regenerates the values of the dominant classes. Sfard (1998) talks about how formal learning has focused on the acquisition of skills, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. She contests that learning is much more complex than this; that it is important to look at the process of learning not simply the acquisition of skills. Brown et al. (1989) question the notion of the superiority of formal learning on the basis that it is context free. They argue that formal learning is dependent on the cultural traditions of the context it is set in. For example the education system, the values put on aspects of knowledge, the way teachers are trained and curriculum is taught are all framed within and shaped by society and therefore can be argued are not context free.

Scribner and Cole (1973) and Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that informal learning in communities and in specific contexts was often more effective and relevant than

traditional formal learning in schools and universities, which had often been regarded as superior and based on a scientific and rational approach. Referring to the context of learning at work for example, (Felstead et al. 2004), consider the fact that most people know, albeit instinctively, that they become more competent through learning as they carry out their work. Colley (2003) raises the point that often the terms and arguments surrounding formal and informal learning, rest on specific value assumptions either implicitly or explicitly, and that they are often defined in terms of being better than another, morally or in terms of effectiveness. I would agree with Colley et al. (2003) that the polarisation of formal and informal learning is not helpful and as Sfard (1998) argues it is important to look at the complexities of all aspects to gain greater understanding of the learning process.

Formal and school learning has been much critiqued (Rogers 2004), and formal learning is often identified as increasing inequalities rather than reducing them. He highlights debates about formal curriculum focusing too much on theory and externally set goals, and where it is not grounded in practical application. He further argues that formal school curriculum can discourage problem solving, creativity, autonomy and independence, and instead can produce learners who are dependent and docile, and who do not challenge the status quo. In the following section I will give a more detailed description of informal learning and look at how this might be seen to produce a different kind of learner.

Informal and 'non-formal' learning

In this section I will discuss the nature of trying to define informal and non-formal learning and some of the challenges that this brings. I will also explore some of the discussions around formal and informal or non-formal learning and some of the differences that have been identified throughout the literature. I conclude this section

by discussing whether or not it is useful to identify hierarchical differences between these two terms.

There are many different and sometimes contradictory or overlapping definitions of informal and non-formal learning. Colley et al. (2003) in exploring these terms and their use in the literature, has quite rightly noted the difficulty faced when trying to define them. In the report they argue that it is only possible to define these terms by referring to the specific contexts in which they are operating. This difficulty unfortunately, leads to a form of negative definition, in which the terms are conceptualised simply by what they are 'not' rather than by what they are. Perhaps the biggest challenge faced however, in terms of adequately defining the two terms, comes in their seeming inter-changeability within much of the literature, in which the two become blurred, as McGivney points out:

'It is difficult to make a clear distinction between formal and informal learning as there is often a crossover between the two' (McGivney 1999:1).

The term 'non-formal' for example, is used by Eraut (2000) to counteract the negative associations which the word 'informal' sometimes has as something undefined or lacking structure. He prefers the terms formal and non-formal. Focussing on learning in the workplace, he argues that the majority of learning takes place outside formal learning contexts but that the use of the term informal is so broad that it does not usefully describe the activity and outcomes, that contribute to 'significant changes' that for him are what define learning.

For Eraut (2004), formal learning has a prescribed learning framework, is organised in a learning package or event, has a teacher or trainer, offers an award or qualification, and has externally set outcomes. He does not define non-formal, but the assumption is that everything that is not formal is by default non-formal. Eraut (2004) also makes the distinction between learning that is intended and that which is not. He makes the distinction between; deliberative learning which is conscious, planned and has a definite goal; reactive learning which can be spontaneous and has different levels of

intention; and implicit learning, where there is no intention to learn and no awareness that learning has taken place. However I cannot help but feel that this definition excludes some other important types of learning. For example, where unintentional learning takes place, which is later made conscious. It may be implicit or reactive, near spontaneous at the start, but by the end there are very clear tangible outcomes.

Unwin, Felstead and Fuller (2009) in exploring the terms formal, non-formal and informal learning in the context of the workplace, similarly seem to use the latter two terms interchangeably. They identify that some organisations have what they term an 'expansive' approach to developing the potential of workplace learning, whereas others have a much more restrictive approach. They argue that it is important to acknowledge the contexts and complexity of the learning process, to be able to look in-depth at the way in which people develop and share skills and knowledge. Ellstrom (2006:44) identifies different types of informal learning, he uses the terms "adaptive (reproductive) and developmental (creative) learning". This consideration of the developmental, or creative side of informal learning, undoubtedly has parallels to Engerström's (2002) idea of transformation, in which collective problem solving allows new knowledge to be generated and also with Eraut's (2004) notion of 'significant change' through learning.

A European Union document (Commission of the European Communities 2001), argues that the intent of the learner to learn is important for both formal and non-formal learning. The paper also establishes a definition of informal learning; 'learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) and typically does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases it is non-intentional (or "incidental"/ random).' (Commission of the European Communities 2001:32-33).

Livingstone (2001) however, divides the learning process into four distinct areas, and thus offers a much needed consideration of the diverse and extensive nature of

informal learning. Thus, he distinguishes between; formal education, non-formal education or further education, informal education or training (in which he includes community development), and informal learning which is 'any activity involving the pursuit of understanding knowledge or skill which occurs without the presence of externally imposed curricular criteria... in any context outside the pre-established curricula of educative institutions.' (2001:4) I would argue that while understanding the distinctions between different types of learning can be useful, these differences are not always clear in reality.

Unfortunately, the need to provide space for informal learning, with limited external criteria, is not something which appears to have been appreciated in recent years. There has been a clear trend towards the formalising of informal learning environments, as shown by the approaches taken in the last few years by the Learning and Skills Agency (LSC) and then the Skills Funding Agency (SfA). The Learning Revolution White paper (2009) however, and the subsequent roll out of informal learning programmes, has done much to provide opportunities to develop and celebrate learning without external curriculum criteria showing a potential move in focus towards informal learning in the future.

Billet (2001b) explores the notion that everything people do will result in learning. He believes that the term 'informal learning' is problematic, because all settings arguably have formalised structures and thus the learning cannot truly be seen as 'informal'. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2001) set out their definitions in a matrix which distinguishes between learning that is intentional or planned and that which is unintentional or unplanned. In my experience while the learning may be intentional or unintentional, an important aspect is that of acknowledging learning through reflection to make it 'real'.

Alan Rogers has contributed to moving the debate away from the unhelpful negative definitions of informal learning prevalent in much of the literature. Rather than defining informal learning in terms of what formal learning is 'not', Rogers sees formal

and informal learning as being on a continuum. Thus, he defines formal education as being: 'that education which is highly de-contextualised, which does not change with changes of participants. I suggest that highly contextualised education, where the framing, the subject matter and the processes change with each new group which is enrolled, might be called informal education.' (Rogers 2004:265). I would argue that all aspects of learning are important, including intentional and unintentional and play a key role in the holistic experience for those involved. Beckett and Hager (2002) agree, concluding that learning needs to be regarded as something organic or holistic which engages with the whole person. Formal and informal/ non-formal learning then are important elements of the broad continuum of learning, and it is not helpful to see them as hierarchically differentiated. I would argue that it is important to be aware of the impact that these terms can have on people within different education and training situations, and the implications that often come with these terms.

In the following section I will continue to think about the importance of formal, informal and non-formal learning, whilst identifying certain key concepts about learning and the learning process.

Key concepts

In this section I will use the definitions and debates about formal and informal or non-formal learning to frame my analysis of the process of learning, the approach the Project takes, and what the data says about the learning process for the people involved. The key concepts I draw on to explore the process of learning in this research, include the idea of a continuum for learning from formal to non-formal and informal (Rogers 2004), in which the two are not seen as dichotomous or mutually exclusive, but rather different ends of the same scale. My starting point is that all aspects of learning across the continuum are important and that informal learning can be relevant, flexible and transferable across different contexts and equally as important as academic learning. Unwin, Felstead and Fuller (2009) identify the complexities of the learning

process and suggest an approach which recognises and examines these complexities, taking a more holistic view to learning is necessary.

Another key concept I want to explore is that learning takes place all the time, in every situation, often spontaneously, unexpectedly and without knowing what the learning will be beforehand, as well as occurring in more planned situations (Engerström 1999). Finally, I would like to explore the importance of reflection; I have included myself and my reflections on learning through the research journey as researcher, and as one of the participants within the Project. Reflection appears to come when those involved are at the point of being ready to recognise the learning and make it something tangible. This can be through self-reflection or supported and encouraged by someone else, a mentor, for example, a peer, friend or professional. It is this reflection that can transform the experience to learning.

In the following section I will discuss some of the concepts of learning that have emerged through my analysis of the data. I will relate these to some of the concepts and debates reviewed above. I begin, in the next section, with an analysis of the learning process identified through my research, particularly in relation to practical experiences.

From experience to learning

In this section I will identify the key learning process that appears to be the basis for the majority of learning taking place within the Project. The focus is on practical experience and experimentation within the learning environment. This learning through practice resonates with the ideas of learning through 'doing' (Lave 1988) and experiential or experience based learning (Kolb 1984, Boud et al. 1985). This learning from and through experiences and practical activities requires an engagement of feelings or senses, relevance to the persons life and reflection to transform the experience and new understanding.

The Project provides very practical learning opportunities, based in the real world, within the local community and the world of work. It focuses on the process not necessarily the product, drawing mainly on a youth work and informal learning approach. George talks about the start of the Project: 'I think that the idea of doing something different with young people in the NEET group and actually providing them with an experiential learning, which was the word we used at the time, environment, seemed like a good idea at the time.' George

The whole process of the development of the Project was experiential and experimental and it was clearly this aspect that was, for George, exciting and stimulating and interested him enough for him to become involved in the Project in the first place. For him, it was the learning through doing, without needing to know what the outcomes would be, learning something 'unstable' and not understood ahead of time that provided a challenge and inspiration, as in Engerström's idea of transformation through action (1999). Engerström argues that this transformation through action also requires language to mediate it and externalise it so that it can be understood, so that while the learning may not be planned it is realised through action and reflection. For Paul and myself this was true as well, it was the journey that was important, neither of us had a very tight picture of what the old builder's yard would look like, nor what would happen there. We all, though, had the confidence at the start to take the risk and know that, as long as young people gained something from being involved, it would have been successful. This confidence came from an understanding or belief in the fact that learning can take place through any experience and in any situation. In the following section I will look in more detail at the theoretical analysis of this understanding of an on-going learning process.

Learning takes place all the time, in every situation, often spontaneously, unexpectedly

In this section I will analyse some examples of learning within the Project that were unexpected or spontaneous. Looking at how these learning experiences can be challenging to capture or identify, but noting their relevance nonetheless.

Often learning can be unexpected and more 'significant' than any planning of outcomes could predict. Hal, talks about his surprise at the outcomes of some of the informal learning which enabled him to experience; reflect on and see things from a different perspective: 'To tell you the truth, I wasn't expecting this much to happen you know. Weren't expecting none of this to happen, really.' Hal

Another example of unexpected learning was for Ryan (a young person who has been involved in the Project at different stages) on a working and cycling trip in France, where he experienced a French street- arts festival, full of extraordinary acts. For Ryan the most important was a very gentle, thought provoking acrobatic performance about loneliness. He watched until the end and reflected on what he felt the performance had meant. This was a learning experience that could not have been anticipated and the level and amount of learning gained from this experience was a lot more than might have been predicted. For another young person, Mel, who was involved with the Project at the start and then got involved again after a break when she had several episodes of mental health issues, came back to work as a volunteer and helped with a wide range of tasks. One of these was co-facilitating a group for parents and she typed up some notes from a session, producing a very accomplished handout which we used in the group. She talked to her Community Psychiatric Nurse (CPN) and told her how pleased she had been with this. Her CPN reflected back that this was the first time Mel had expressed pride in something she had done. These unexpected outcomes are true for many of the people involved in the process of learning, and are difficult to quantify or capture.

These informal learning experiences, as seen from the examples above, are often perceived by the learner to be very valuable. In the following section I will identify some of the contradictions that learners identify or perceive between this type of informal and unexpected learning, and more formal, intended learning, such as school

based education.

Experiences of formal learning and informal learning

In this section I will explore some of the contradictions that individuals involved in the Project have identified between their own formal learning experiences and the informal learning they experience at the Project. I will also note the relevance of two other aspects of informal learning that are identified by young people involved in the Project. These are: the practical nature of learning through doing, and seeing a tangible outcome from their learning experience.

The young people who come to the Project have often had real difficulties engaging with formal learning, and many have been excluded from school. Many people from the local community have also talked about bad experiences of formal learning at school, their own poor literacy skills and lack of confidence. Formal learning was seen by many of the young people and for some of the members of the community as problematic. Rather than engaging them and their interests, their experiences of formal school learning had often made them feel excluded, by not valuing their practical skills or challenging them to solve problems and find solutions.

Mark, who felt constricted and tied down by formal school learning, felt more able to contribute and be fully engaged and valued through the informal learning at the Project. He talks about his negative early experiences of school and eventually how he was excluded and left without qualifications. He recognised that he needed to sort out where he was going, in order to feel a sense of achievement. Mark talks about his experience of formal learning at school and the contrast to this of learning in a contextualised, informal setting:

‘I was, well, I got kicked out of school..... what happened at school I din’t really want to

sit down I was I was like always being naughty and that, but when I was here I was getting on with it cause they was actually treating you like adults here and like at school they treat you like little kidsReally, really changed my life. I was like, I didn't think I could really get anywhere.'

Mark talks about some of the differences for him between formal school learning and his experience of informal learning at the Project. He describes the feeling of being respected, and of not wanting to sit down, to learn through practical activities. He also, identifies that he knew he wanted to do something, that in a sense he was making a choice and felt 'open to learn'.

For him, it was the practical aspect of the work that was really important; he could see the immediate relevance and a visible result for his endeavour, and this gave him a real sense of achievement. Like others, he enjoyed doing something that gave an immediate sense of achievement, and was practical, hands-on and satisfying and that he could feel and see that he was progressing. He also valued being able to gain some qualifications, that provided certificates recognised by other organisations and employers. For him, contributing to a 'real world' of work gave him a real sense of achievement and of being valued:

'Well it was different cause it was like more hands-on, that's the sort of stuff like, more than doin' sittin' in a class room and learning from paper work, work. I'd rather get hands-on and get into it like. It was better 'cause I see myself movin' forward 'cause we got the qualifications for grass cutting and stuff like that.' Mark

For many other young people this experience of immediate success in a more informal setting, rather than compounding their experience of failure in more formal settings, was important. Success in this context for many of the young people was represented by seeing the results of their work. For Tod, one young person who worked at the Project, this was seeing the flat he was helping to decorate, finished, and seeing the trellis he had made, in place. For Jake and Hal it was helping with the roof on the

Project and helping build two cars which were used on a working trip to France.

In the next section I will continue looking at different processes of learning, focussing on the relevance of learners taking responsibility for their own learning and behaviour as well as the importance of learners feeling they are respected and have a certain level of autonomy.

Being respected, learning through making mistakes, and taking responsibility

In this section I will start by using some individual examples to address the importance for learners of feeling respected by those around them, especially by the 'facilitators' of education and learning. I will go on to link this with the process of learning through making mistakes and how some of those involved in the Project feel about this. Underlying all of this, I will note the connection between these two aspects of learning and the need for learners to be able to take responsibility for their own learning process as well as their own actions.

Mark talks about how he has developed and what triggered him to engage with learning and work. For him a very important factor is being treated with respect, as an adult and as someone who can make choices and decisions for himself. He went on to a work experience setting after he left the Project, which was not all positive, but he had developed skills for self reflection and self awareness and he recognised that he needed to take responsibility for changing the situation.

Greg, talking about his own learning as a young man, also felt that having the space to try out the skills, without the pressure of others, or the derision of others, means that it is possible to put new skills in to practice and learn through mistakes:

‘I always think it’s watching, getting out of the way and having a go to see if you can get on with it, if it don’t go ok you don’t do it no more, if you can’t get on with it. Then you think. Cause see nowadays, if you can’t do something they always seem to take the mickey out of you and everything, you’re useless, you’re no good, they don’t give nobody a chance, or nothing.’

Similarly, for Hal, being able to try out new skills, to be given the chance to put knowledge and skills into practice was an important element of learning: ‘One of the best things for me was like. ..always I got a chance to do it’. Hal

Jake, who had experienced bullying at work before he came, explained that being able to try things out, make mistakes and be given responsibility, gave him confidence. Adding to this Greg also felt it is important to be prepared to take advice and listen to others: that if you are too sure of yourself you do not learn from the knowledge of others. This fine line between having the confidence to ask questions and take in new situations, and yet not being too arrogant, so that you think you have no further learning to gain, is important to be aware of, as Greg explains:

‘I think one or two of them that come here they knew it all before they got here. But once they started they were no goodif they’d just listen, listen to people.’ Greg goes on to highlight the point that from his experience it is essential for young people to learn through trying out: ‘They haven’t had a chance to try anything, nobody let them do anything. If I was a young boy, [I’d] need to have the opportunity.’

Greg also draws on his own experience recognising that some young people, as he did, concentrate better on their own when they are learning something new:

‘Trouble is, one is enough [to work with] you get two or three and they start messing about, and if you tell em anything they don’t listen. We used to be the same, you’d get a crowd of you, and then you mess about.’ Greg

Many of these comments suggest that for those interviewed learning seems to go hand in hand with feeling respected, and trusted to do the job. Many express the importance of being given the space and the trust to be able to try things out for themselves, make mistakes and learn from these. They also note that when given an opportunity that provides them with these kinds of experiences, they are much more prepared to be responsible and listen to advice.

In the following section I will explore how some of these aspects identified through my research may seem to be in conflict or contrast with ideas of formalised education processes.

Structure, informality and flexibility

In this section I will look at whether or not it is useful to use the terms 'formal' and 'informal' learning and how many of the young people at the Project reacted to these, particularly in relation to formalised learning. I will also note some of the aspects of reflective learning.

Rogers (2004) and Schuller and Watson (2009) discuss the distinctions made between formal 'schooling' and 'informal or non-formal learning' and argue that these distinctions are not helpful: not only does it reinforce a hierarchy of knowledge, and skills but it can also de-motivate and alienate those that do not readily fall into the academic aspect of learning. George talks about how the formal and rigid structures can be unhelpful, particularly for those young people leaving care or who have had little chance of making decisions and taking responsibility for themselves. While James, one of the members of staff at the Project, describes how he perceives the experience for many young care leavers, who often have not had the opportunity to develop the skills to take responsibility for themselves and their decision making:

‘Their experience, well the initial group, their experience was coming out of care... other people being responsible for them, other people making decisions for them. Their experience of school was very negative it was very highly disciplined, being challenged; they were always being challenged..... there is a structure around the Project that’s there for them to hold on to, but there’s also a, a one-to-one, almost mentored support that is very different from what they have experienced so far. The Project seems to provide a flexible approach and to be able to allow them the time to settle in and that is, I think, is probably the biggest effect.’ James

Having the time to build relationships, develop skills, knowledge and above all else, confidence to be able to deal with new situations and challenges, makes the difference for some of the young people who have struggled in other situations. In relation to this the mentoring programme and role of being a mentor, are important elements for many of the young people at the Project, supporting them to reflect and learn from experiences. The relationship with a mentor is very different from the more formal and sometimes distant relationship with ‘teachers’. Jake, talks about how having some one-to-one support at the start enabled him to build relationships and trust with staff and be able to try out new things. Before coming to the Project he had become almost reclusive, fearful of being bullied or laughed at:

‘When I first came I was really nervous as I didn’t know anyone. As soon as I met Paul, he was just not like anyone else. He acts like he already knows you. He doesn’t judge you by [your past]. They built my confidence up. They did one-on-ones with me, and boosted me up. ... It made me feel more [like a man]... If I hadn’t come to The Project, I’d still be at home probably. Like, not have a job, I wouldn’t have had no confidence. I’d just be in my own little box. I wouldn’t have had the chance to go outside and meet new people.....’ Jake

This gentle engagement, support and building of relationships appears to be an important element of engaging young people in learning at the Project. This is also connected to the area of learning I would like to investigate next, the hidden learning outcomes that many young people gain through their work at the Project.

Explicit or hidden learning outcomes

In this section I will explore some of the learning outcomes that are realised after a learning process, or that the learner is not aware of at the time. I will explore this through some experiences at the Project and go on to briefly look at the role that the facilitator has in drawing out this learning by encouraging self-reflection.

There is often a hidden agenda behind what appears to be 'informal learning' and the real outcomes that the facilitator, teacher, youth worker or the wider organisation, has in mind. James, one of the members of staff, talks about how he sees the learning for the young people involved:

'you may be learning how to build a brick wall ... but actually what you're learning about is yourselves more than anything else. ...the whole project isn't about building a wall, it's as you said it's about building confidence, building relationships.'

James relates this to his own position:

'It's exactly the same for me when I first started, I didn't know there was stuff that I could do, I didn't know there were challenges I would get through. So actually, it doesn't matter what age you are, you learn all the way through, ok, that for me is the overriding, the overriding ethos of the Project is that it is about you moving forward with yourself. Sometimes you look at yourself in the mirror and sometimes reflecting how you work, how you deal with relationships and going forward'.

I find this aspect is very interesting as part of looking at the roles different people take on through different types of learning process. Observing Paul working with a group of young people, I see him drawing out from them what they have learnt from a working situation, mapping these to more 'formal outcomes', but also encouraging them to identify for themselves what was important for them. This could be seen as the facilitator holding the power, however it could also be identified as an integral part of

the learning process, where 'learning' and 'knowledge' are externalised and made explicit as part of the move towards independence.

Supporting and encouraging self-reflection and self-awareness are central to non-formal and informal learning. As participants in learning we often find it difficult to put into words what we have learnt and the facilitator, mentor, or 'outsider' may be able to see more clearly from a different perspective and help reflect this back. For myself, having supervision meetings have been invaluable; both for me to have to explain what I have done, externalise ideas and concepts and having feedback has helped me to see things from a different perspective.

Learning process / goals or outcomes

In this section I will explore the tensions that can exist between formal learning outcomes and the actual process of learning, especially when this learning process is informal and practical.

An interesting example at the Project where the formal and informal or non-formal intersected was when an intensive course commissioned by Connexions was run. The course was aimed at young people in year 11, who had been identified as either without a clear 'destination' or who possibly would not take up their 'destination' after the summer break. Nine young people completed the week, which was made up of very practical activities: they built a bicycle, which they could then use and take home, they did some bricklaying and they did mower maintenance and grass cutting. The aim was that the young people involved would end up with at least one accreditation certificate, and hopefully two. The staff at the Project explained that they would be working towards these certificates and outlined the course structure on the first day. The course itself was very practical and the young people only had to do a minimum amount of paper work, completing a few quizzes etc to answer specific assessment

criteria. The rest of the paper work was carried out by the staff, who wrote witness testimonies to show how the young people had covered the different aspects of the course. At the end of the course it was the staff who helped put together the folders and pulled together all the evidence, photos etc to show that the young people had completed everything. The feedback on the course from the young people who took part was very positive. They felt they had done a lot of different things and learnt lots of skills. One participant, Sara, who lives with her grandparents, was so excited and enthused by the week that 'she couldn't stop talking about it' according to her grandmother.

In this course the evidencing and making explicit on paper the informal learning, was only partially the responsibility of the young people. As the 'learning provider' it was the Project's responsibility to bring together the evidence of what the young people had learned, in portfolios with photographs and writing, to demonstrate that the young people had met the outcomes to gain the qualification.

For the staff involved there was clearly a tension between providing the young people with an informal learning experience, while ensuring the formality of the externally imposed learning outcomes and qualification set by the LSC (Learning and Skills Council), were evidenced. The Project supported the young people to put together a portfolio, which the young people did not see at the time as particularly important; for them the more tangible results of building and using a bike, taking part in the practical activities and the intrinsic sense of achievement they felt, were paramount. However, at the end of the course the portfolios were seen by the young people as valuable records of their achievements. This awareness of the potential achievements that can be gained through certain experiences is often connected to a stronger feeling of being 'open to learning'. In the following section I will use the example above to investigate the importance of the 'desire to learn' in more detail.

Being 'open to learning'

In this section I will continue to explore some of the learning that came from the course described in the previous section. I will investigate the importance of the learner having an intention to learn, using examples of some of the young people, volunteer and staff experiences at the Project. I will also connect this to another program at the Project and how the differences in individuals' interest and desire to learn reflected in their learning experience and outcomes.

What is important in learning? I am going to use the course example given in the previous section to demonstrate some of these areas. We have on the one hand the process, which in this instance was for the young people very practical and hands on, and on the other hand, the product, the achievement and evidencing of outcomes from the course. It seems to be that, as Eraut (2000) points out, the intention to learn can be important, but also that this does not have to be explicit at the start of the process. Involvement in and being open to learning can be seen as being on a continuum and part of the process. We can learn without first having the intention to, but the most significant changes are where someone has begun to engage and involve themselves and can see themselves as active in the decision making throughout the process. I see this hook or 'openness to learn' as an important factor in people engaging in learning. It is a balance of both the relevance of the learning and the desire to learn.

Seb, who came to the Project when he moved to the town where the Project is located and was living in a 'dry' house to support him to get off drink and drugs, describes how for him it was the process that was important and that in a way the 'skills' were an added bonus or by-product. Seb felt that he had gained from the Project mainly by 'learning how to cope with different people. How to interact with people younger than me, .. and also just the practical things, how to lay bricks and that, gardening. .. a lot of it.., is knowing how; how to get over obstacles .., know the skill itself, it's how to get over things is the bigger part.' Seb had made the decision that he wanted to change his life and was ready to learn and make those changes with the support of the Project. Seb remembers the point at which he made this decision to change his life:

‘I woke up in the morning and then I just it clicked in my mind you know, I need to, I need to turn my life around. Ever since then, everything’s gone alright. I’ve had a few, a few ups and downs, but mostly it’s been alright.’

This initial engagement and readiness or openness to learning, seems to be an important aspect of the learning process, but it has to come from self-reflection. I was able to observe James, a member of staff working with the young people at the Project encouraging them through conversation and practical activities to engage in learning and develop self-reflection. However he found it difficult to engage fully with the Project himself and in the interview he describes himself as being an observer rather than a player. This is a view that was shared by others who became involved in the Project and tried to remain distant at the beginning. Greg describes his first engagement with the Project and how he said he wouldn’t get involved but was happy to give advice. Then he is slowly drawn in, getting involved in growing plants and eventually is there every day, including going to pottery class in the evenings. He and his wife say how much he gets from it, his wife, Eleanor states; ‘it’s done him so much good. He loves it. He would bring his bed up here if he could’.

Making a commitment to something is often the first step towards being open to learning. Hal talks about his turning point when he decided that he wanted to stop ‘messing around’. If you don’t care about something you don’t have to make a commitment to yourself and others it enables you to feel removed from any decisions good and bad. Hal had made a realisation that he wanted to stay, that he was getting something from being at the Project.

This openness to, or engagement in learning, was very clearly demonstrated in a group I was facilitating at the Project for parents, all of whom had significant issues, and several, either had or were at risk of their child being taken into care. Of the four people in the group, one of them, Natalie, enrolled on another assertiveness course, is participating fully in all the discussions, identifying examples, describing how she is putting into practice ideas, and putting together a folder from handouts and her own

writing. Her friend, Donna, who also comes, contributes at times to the discussions but finds it hard to give examples from experience. At times she tries to distract her friend by making asides and jokes and often looks at her mobile phone. She has been on other courses and knows the 'right' answers but she has not made any personal commitment, perhaps because she has not found self-motivation. Interestingly at the end of the final session, during which Donna had been particularly disengaged, she waited around and apologised, explaining that she had just heard that it was very likely that her baby would be taken into care. She said she wanted to come to other sessions in the future. She struggles with reading and writing and her previous formal learning experiences have been very difficult. Although in the sessions she found it very hard to engage, there was clearly something motivating her to keep trying. The learning process appears to require those involved to make a commitment to it or be open or ready to learn.

One aspect that seems to have helped some of the other young people at the Project to engage with the learning process was being able to connect their learning to the outside world; externalising their learning.

Externalising the learning

One of the aspects that comes through as being an important part of the learning process is externalising it; having to tell someone else what you have done. Jake, Hal and Seb have given talks in front of large groups of people and told them about their learning. At first they found this difficult, but also found the sense of achievement afterwards very empowering, realising, through telling others and using images to illustrate, how much they had achieved. This sense of embedding and acknowledging their learning both through practical work and through telling others about it externalises and confirms their experiences.

Another important factor that seems to have helped young people in the learning process is feeling that they can develop some personal skills to help them deal with issues that come up in life. This is something I will look at in the following section.

Learning for resilience

In this section I will explore some aspects of personal development through learning. I will discuss how for some young people, learning to cope with difficult situations, learning to be respected and to respect others in return and realising that they could make their own choices in life, were some of the most important learning outcomes that the Project provided them with.

Seb talks about some of the setbacks he has had and the importance for him of being able to cope with these. He is very clear about the need to build up the emotional strength to overcome obstacles and develop resilience: 'Get up and get on. Before every knock I used to give up and go back to my old ways but now I think it's just a knock and it's not going to kill you, it's just going to make you stronger you know. .. a lot of it you know, is knowing, how, how to get over obstacles .. it's not ..the skill itself it's how to get over things is the bigger part.' This appears to be in contrast to what is sometimes referred to as an 'inoculation effect' where a bad experience of something, makes the participant more resistant to it the next time.

Hal's experience of being teased by workmates in his job on the building site, while not positive at the time, made him all the more determined to succeed and find work. Learning, whether formal and informal/ non-formal plays a part at every stage of our lives and in every situation if we are open to it; it is often through learning that people can move from one position or situation to another. The young people and staff interviewed all talk of the importance of the feeling of being respected and treated as an adult; feeling valued and asked to take responsibility for their actions. The ethos at

the Project is that the young people must make their own way to the Project and come of their own choice. Young people start to make a commitment to a work routine and to feel part of a team. One young person Cory, who had been referred to the Project through his youth offending key worker, had, like many of the others found it very hard to get involved in anything. His home life is very chaotic, living with and, in part, supporting his alcoholic mother. At the Project he soon found both a structure and a purpose. When his key worker called in one day she was very surprised to see him there and later told Paul that Cory had been offered a bribe of money and drugs to stay away from the Project by a 'mate'. But clearly for him, the importance of the sense of belonging and achievement that the Project gave him, at that point, outweighed the potential to enjoy himself and 'hang out' with his peers.

I would like to come back to this structure that the Project provides to the young people involved and see how, as for Cory, it can be helpful in creating a routine and structure to their lives.

Structure, informality and responsibility

In this section I will investigate the importance of the structure provided by the organisation of the Project and how this can help the young people to gain a certain degree of stability that they may not have in other parts of their lives. I will also briefly touch on how this stability provides a feeling of safety and helps young people to take responsibility for their actions within the wider group.

The Project has developed a structure to the day that provides stability for participants. When they arrive, at 8.30am there is a twenty minute period when they meet in the 'break out room' upstairs and everyone talks about the coming plans for the day and has something to eat and drink. Everyone knows the shape of the working day,

although the work that is done is often varied. The young people are involved in all aspects; for example carrying out risk assessments, planning the day, thinking about the tools required etc. Alongside the practical safety issues of any work, there are also the safety needs young people have about knowing that the organisation and people around them will all 'look out for each other' (Jake) and keep them safe. This is something that the Project tries to re-enforce on a regular basis to give the young people a stronger feeling of support. This balance of protection and taking responsibility for their own actions is a fine line, and the process of informal learning through conversation (Jeffs and Smith (1996, 2005), aims to constantly re-evaluate, challenge and give space to question actions and attitudes. One aspect of this challenging of attitudes is the Project's attempt to challenge the negative self-perceptions that young people often have of themselves. In the following section I will investigate this in more detail.

Comfort zone of negativity

In this section I will explore how the negative perceptions young people often have of themselves can become the norm and a comfort zone for them and that as a result, receiving positive feedback can be challenging or threatening to this. I will discuss how the Project tries to be aware of this and the challenges it poses in regard to feedback. I will also explore how important it is and how helpful it can be for young people to challenge these perceptions and change their view of themselves. When a young person has had very negative experiences and a lack of support, their self esteem and confidence can be low and it can be hard to change their view of themselves and of other people to one that is more positive. They often feel more comfortable being the person who is blamed, Paul explains this: 'For many of the young people, they have grown up with a negative view of themselves and they can feel challenged and uncomfortable when a different view is expressed. In other words, their comfort zone is one of negativity, it can be very frightening. It is easier to be negative than to be

positive.'

In order to combat or challenge this, the Project tries to provide the young people with clear boundaries, mentors and a positive learning experience, where they can feel a sense of achievement and self worth. Seb talks about how this worked for him:

'The Project has changed the way I think. It's changed me as a person. Now I realise I can walk away from trouble, that I can do good things. I like being able to do things to help people. It makes me feel good. I used to get told that I was stupid- I used to give in and believe it. Now people have confidence in me, and they support and help me- The Project has shown me that I can do well.' Seb

This sense of achievement and confidence often takes time to build and for some young people praise can feel very uncomfortable. Paul explains that this is something that the Project staff have to think about as they work with the young people:

'Learning is not sequential or linear; you can often see regression and progression, sometimes in the same day. You often find that after praise, young people can regress. It could be because this takes them out of their usual negative view of themselves and this feels uncomfortable, so they behave in a way that reinforces their negative view of themselves.'

Challenging this comfort zone of negativity appears to be an important aspect of the approach the Project takes to supporting young people to engage with and take part in learning. Young people are encouraged through conversation and reflection to explore and challenge for themselves these comfort zones of negativity.

Learning as a researcher and as a worker/ participant in the project

In the final section, I will briefly note the learning process that I have been through myself, acknowledging some of the challenging aspects that this has brought with it.

It has been interesting to observe my learning through the process both of carrying out the research, but also through being involved in the project. In the process I have not suddenly transformed into a researcher, but I have been learning about, using knowledge and practical skills, discussing and having to explain my research. Slowly it becomes part of what I do, how I think, question and interrogate myself. Learning can also be very painful, requiring perseverance and a view of the long term or greater purpose for undertaking it, to be able to have the resilience and determination to keep going.

Conclusion

In my conclusion I will bring together the various aspects and impact of learning and the learning process that I have discussed in the previous sections. I will also link this to some of the theory and literature.

Learning across the continuum from formal and informal requires participants to be 'open to learning'. The findings that are clearly coming from the literature and the stories are that learning is complex (Billett 2001a and b; and Colley et al. 2003). Many of the examples above show some of aspects such as outcomes and objectives, self-perceptions, desire to learn and even hidden outcomes, all of which affect the process of learning. To engage with learning it needs to be relevant to the lives, interests and expectations of those taking part, with participants actively involved it needs to have currency in the 'real world' (Lave 1988, Boud et al.1985). In order to have the greatest impact it also needs to be dynamic and flexible. As we saw in the examples in this chapter, learning is acknowledged, confirmed and strengthened by externalising it in some way, through telling others about it, and putting it into use in some way.

Formal learning can constrain the way in which we see the process of learning (Beckett and Hager 2002). Where outcomes are too tightly defined at the start we can restrict what learning might come out of the experience, and therefore exclude often very

significant learning that takes place. The unexpected and surprising elements of learning can be missed. The recent move towards funding for learning for young people through the 'Young People's Learning Alliance' (YPLA) which is more 'outcome' focussed, requiring qualification outcomes, means that the tension between informal learning approaches and outcome requirements will become more difficult to balance. The product (qualification and outcome focus) will have greater hold than the process of learning, making the outcomes less flexible and less responsive to the needs of the young people.

The role of the adults, youth workers and facilitators involved in the process is important. In formal learning they are often much more focussed on providing knowledge or skills. In a more informal setting where the process of learning is important, their role is often more as facilitators or mentors, supporting self reflection, questioning, holding boundaries and encouraging young people to take responsibility. The Project has a distinctive approach to learning. The process of developing self confidence, self reflection and resilience are at the centre of this, through a mentoring approach. Learning happens across all aspects of the Project and the skills of the staff are to find ways to capture this through conversation, discussion, photographs and digital recordings, as well as through written documentation. The Project works very practically with the young people to develop confidence, skills, attitude, knowledge and most importantly self reflection, so that they have the skills to learn from any future experience if they chose to.

In the next Chapter I explore the concepts of community, first through the literature and then what it means for the young people and for those living in and around the Project.

Chapter 6

Emerging themes: Sense of community

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the term 'community', what it means and what the people in and involved in the Project think of as their community. In the previous chapter I explored what is meant by learning, from formal to non-formal and informal learning, and looked at how young people, members of the local community and the Project see the process of learning. Like learning, a sense of community is hard to capture, and is constantly shifting. It is important to explore community as something dynamic, where its context, time and place and interactions, all inevitably involve learning.

I will begin by defining community in a wider theoretical context, before going on to explore the 'sense of community' in the more specific context of the Project.

What do we mean by community?

Community is defined in different ways, for example; geographical areas, shared interests or experiences, shared values. Gilchrist (2007: viii) defines community as a 'set of people who have something in common and are connected through interaction and shared interests. This could be based on locality, a shared identity or experience of discrimination'. Fraser (1999) argues that the term 'community' can be seen as a value, which brings together a number of elements. It can also be seen in terms of; a geographical place or locality; a shared interest (Hoggett 1997); and a community of attachment (Willmott 1989). However, it is important to note, that whilst a community includes the notion of similarity, it can also be shaped by the difference it has, as compared with other communities (Cohen 1985). The positive and negative effects of

community have also received considerable attention. Putnam (2000) and Coleman (1988) for example, develop the concepts of networking, bridging, bonding and social cohesion. Putnam (2000) makes a correlation between a reduction in membership of community organisations and the level of social capital and civic engagement in society. This interpretation appears to have been seized upon by the new Coalition Government, whose 'Big Society' (2010), optimistically identifies localities and communities as being the hubs for providing many services. Critiques of the concept of social capital however, often focus on the negative aspects, where social injustices are reinforced and those involved are constricted (Ladd 1999).

The notions of community offered by Gilchrist (2007) and Fraser (1999) however, have been challenged by those who view the task of identifying those within a community as being far more complex than the former give credit to. Living in close proximity for example, does not necessarily mean people will have a lot of contact with each other or have a sense of community (Lee and Newby 1983). This 'sense' or 'feeling' of community is a very interesting aspect of the debate, which I explore in relation to Lave and Wenger's (1991) work on communities of practice and Gee's critique (2005).

The concept of communities of practice developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), identifies that in everyday life, work, education, people come together to take part in activities which provide the catalyst for communities of practice. These activities are characterised by three aspects; mutual engagement; a joint enterprise and a shared language; routines which help them function as members of the group. This they call 'situated learning' widening out previous concepts of learning as I discussed in Chapter 5 on formal and informal learning. Gee (2005) challenges the notion of communities of practice because it implies that there is a sense of 'belonging' in the notion of community. Gee argues that community 'is constantly shifting and is often on an instantaneous feeling of belonging which may last for a moment in time' (Gee 2005: 214). This momentary aspect of being part of a 'community' is one that I want to explore and comes through the stories from young people and members of the community in my research.

A sense of community can be about the close ties we make, feeling a part of something, Putnam describes what he sees as the strongest ties: 'For most of us, our deepest sense of belonging is to our most intimate social networks, especially family and friends.' (2000:274). He identifies 'weak' ties in other groupings; for example work, religion, and neighbourhood. Here I would question that these other ties are necessarily 'weak' as often people develop very strong ties linked to interests, religion and work.

Through my case study I want to explore some of the key aspects of communal life identified by Walzer (1997): tolerance which incorporates; openness, respect and willingness to listen and learn. This resonates with Tett (2006: 69): 'Communities need to be open to mutual recognition of the different perspectives and alternative views of the world in ways that allow pre-judgements to be challenged so that assumptions can be amended and an enriched understanding of others can be developed.' She goes on to argue that, like Engerström, it is language and discussion that is at the heart of this transformation or change.

I also draw on the notion that the very nature and experience of community that can be momentary (Gee 2005). For the Project, this sense of changing, shifting and different communities overlapping is evident through my research data. As we have seen, there are several different ways of looking at these different 'communities'; the young people; the staff, the wider community, but within those, there are constantly shifting and changing boundaries and allegiances.

Boud et al. (1993) argue that learning comes from the experiences, activities and situations we are involved in but that it is through reflection that learning is extended. Boud et al (1993: 26-31) identifies three actions required for reflection to take place. These are; going over what has happened, being aware of feelings in the past and in the present; and evaluating so that new knowledge can be generated and acted on. Schön talks about the importance of 'reflecting in action' thinking at the same time as

carrying out an activity and also thinking through afterwards which he calls 'reflecting on action' Schön also argues that practitioners need to be reflective to build an attitude of respect and this requires them to be ever more aware of themselves and their actions, to question and challenge themselves and to be open to change (1983: 299)

In Engerström's activity theory (Engerström 1999) he argues that learning is dynamic and complex. Learning in this approach is collective and social as well as an individual process. It can be innovative and transforming and the key to mediation is language, where verbalising enables the process to be externalised and understood. Engerström explains that communities are made up of complex individuals and shifting relationships and feelings, and the interactions between the players can be very complex. The concept of activity theory; where it is possible to look at incidents and activities situated in particular contexts and time, is useful:

'This highlights the creative processes of negotiation and argumentation that the person uses in her everyday doings. It opens up new paths to explore people's participation in practices, and the communities that these practices imply.' (Engerström 1999: 21-28)

Activity Theory provides a framework for exploring the relationships between individuals and their social environments, where actions are the manifestation (Engerström 1999) of social and cultural contexts. Engerström highlights the inevitable tensions or what he calls 'contradictions' between what someone says and does. He sees these as opportunities to be explored and resolved through an action or activity. Eraut challenges Lave and Wenger's concept of 'peripheral participation' in relation to change in communities. He argues that it can be seen as simply reinforcing the existing 'community' and it does not adequately provide an explanation as to how communities can transform themselves. However, Engerström's theory provides a way for looking at the events, interactions, tensions and contradictions in communities set in the context of creating an opportunity to change and find new solutions. It also provides a way to explore the specific tensions and the ways in which people talk about learning in the

Project. The focus on practical learning through doing (Lave 1988), while at the same time learning through conversation and reflection (Smith 1994; Jeffs and Smith 1999; Boud 1993; Schön 1983). Many of the people in the Project talk about how they value 'learning how to' learning through activity (bricklaying, car repairs, growing plants) rather than 'learning about'. However it appears that it is through conversation and reflection on the activity that learning is brought out and crystallised.

The dynamic approach of Engeström's activity theory has resonance with the work of informal and youth and community work, where conversations (Jeffs and Smith 1996, 2005) form a key aspect of learning. Smith (1994) argues that conversation is a legitimate activity in itself and is an important part of reflection and learning (Smith 1994). Challenging and using language to clarify thoughts and ideas; in this way, the 'story telling' enables people to verbalise and make their voices explicit. This telling of the story of the Project by those young people already involved in and those who have been through the project, to other newer members, gives them a sense of belonging and importance, holding part of the collective knowledge and history of the Project. In the following section I will further investigate the meaning of community in the area around the Project and how this has changed over time for the residents and people involved in the area.

The changing community around the Project

What kind of communities are in and around the Project? There is the locality itself, which sits in the middle of a residential area made up of small terraced houses, with a mixed population. Some of the residents have lived there all their lives and their families before them, so there is a knowledge and sense of the place. There are new residents and families. Some of the housing is privately owned, but also there are properties for rent and the transient population has grown, as well as the range of cultural ethnicities; in particular the Portuguese families coming over to work in local

industries. There are a few shops scattered along the adjacent road. Everyone has their own perspective of what they see as community. Greg talks about the area and how it was when he first moved there with his wife, Eleanor. In contrast to the usual common saying that people 'in the old days' got on better, his memories are of a life where people kept themselves to themselves:

'Well, it's funny really, ..even then you didn't know all the people, you knew the people three or four up from you or three or four down and that was it, you know. You never got involved with one another years ago, and that but you know what I mean, they kept themselves... to themselves more or less ...' Greg

Greg poses the question about the intent to engage in a community. He is questioning his own readiness to see himself as part of the community when he was young, whereas now he feels that his attitude and the way he reacts to, and therefore the way in which the community reacts to him, have changed. Through the project he has become involved with and got to know new members of the community. He and Henry have built a strong relationship and often coordinate when they meet at the Project and help each other. The Pottery group has brought in new members of the community, people in the group have established strong friendships, a sense of mutual support and achievement and a chance to socialise and laugh together. Greg has brought interesting objects to share with the group that he has found over the years, fossils, pottery. 'He loves his pottery' comments Eleanor.

While clearly for Louise, her experience or memory of her experience of living in the community was different. She remembers some of the buildings changing hands but the area and buildings have remained the same, apart from the loss of some of the shops and post office etc which used to be a hub for the local community:

'There used to be more of a community feel around here because everybody used the post office to collect your pension, everybody used the newsagent and because specialised shops have gone, there's no um, there's no community base anymore.'

Louise

Clearly for Louise, at that stage, her meeting with others in the post office gave a central hub for the 'community' to meet. This could be a gendered perspective. Was the 'community' she was involved in at that time, largely female, while Greg and other young men felt less engaged?

In the next section I am going to explore the ways in which in the local community have become involved in the project.

The Project and engagement with the local community

George describes that at the start of the project the local community had to slowly get to know about and build up trust in the Project. In the first instance, this was on a very small and practical basis, and as the project was able to develop projects that directly related to the locality, it grew:

[At the start] '.. the engagement of the community was purely down to the contact that was necessary with the immediate neighbour and that was Vernon and Louise and to a certain extent, was reliant on them passing word about what was going on, and understandably, some concern as to what was going to go on in that place,there was concern and over a period of six months that concern started to lessen. Over a period of twelve months ... that concern, maybe it hasn't disappeared, but .. people now have.. even after twelve months...a level of ownership over what was going on because of the way we'd developed ... and some feelthat it's 'our Project'. George

George describes the slow process of the project being accepted and trusted in the local community, and the 'Pride in our Road' project where young people made planters and with the help of Greg planted them; they cleaned up some of the local

front gardens and delivered the planters to the households in one of the adjacent streets. Before this project the interaction with members of the local community had been as and when they made contact, through occasional conversations. People could see the changes that were happening to the building and slowly got to know the project and the people involved.

In the next section I am going to explore what is meant by the community of the Project and what this means for the people involved.

The community of the Project

There is the community of the Project itself, made up of staff, volunteers, young people, friends, professionals who have some kind of link, each creating 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991). The community of the Project is changing all the time, some of the paid members of staff have left and a new one joined during the period I researched the project. In this period the paid staff comprised a part time project manager, a full time project worker, a full time building supervisor, and a part time building worker. The roles of the members of the staff were to work with young people and engage them through 'real work experience' and help them develop the skills, knowledge and attitude to work and learning.

The volunteers work in many different aspects of the project; both Paul and George have worked for much of their time in this period on a voluntary basis. Other volunteers offered specific skills, for example one volunteer developed the recycling of bicycles, another, the growing of flowers, one helped with accounts and another with the allotments, and the community group committee, who came to meetings, helped with events. Each volunteer comes with their own interest and level of commitment, and reason for getting involved. Some of the young people who are involved in the project come for a year, the 'core group'; usually for two days a week, working alongside the members of staff. This is usually one member of staff to two young

people, giving the time for learning through conversation and mentoring, as well as through the practical tasks.

There is also the interface between the Project and the community in the locality, the young people take the skills into the community around the project. Mark talks about the way in which the Project incorporated these aspects of social capital and that for him, they were very important in his feeling a sense of belonging to the community of the Project:

‘but when I was here I was getting on with it cause they was actually treating you like adults here and like at school they treat you like little kids and like that.that’s why I stayed [It] really, really changed my life.’ Mark

Louise talks about some research she was involved in about services available in the town, and she describes how people, including herself, limit themselves to where they will go. Yet when Louise feels a strong enough purpose or sense of community she has got involved for example at the table top sales and car boot sales. This sense of ‘community’ and interest in the activity can outweigh and overcome some of the other reasons for not getting involved. Hal describes how he became involved in the project and realised that he wanted to be part of the community within the Project:

‘Yeah, I don’t know I just take it seriously, [at the start] I thought it was a joke really, and I got really distracted from doing anything. And I started mucking about and I thought oh, I didn’t like coming here and then Paul and James took me and told me that I might get chucked off the course. I didn’t want to do that. So I did enjoy it, and it’s changed my life from mucking about and cause Lewis left, well I was down here and I decided I got to do what I got to do, ever since then I got on.’

James describes how he saw the project and the position he took:

‘I think that ... I was carried along with that. Rather than being pro active in it more

than anything else. I think I was very much a fly on the wall watching something happen. Even though I was a Director or whatever, I feel really I was there really to experience. That's how I, how I viewed it from the beginning and that, and that, my involvement would, would come as things changed and as things happened,' James

For James he clearly did not feel a sense of being part of a community at the Project, he chose to be an 'onlooker'. He sees the young people at the Project and the local community as separate and does not include himself as part of either of these communities. This clearly contrasts with Greg's experience and attitude:

'Well what I think it is, that when they first come here .. often [they] don't know anybody and they don't say a lot, then after a week or two they get in with the other lads some of them they really enjoy it, they really enjoy doing the job. I think most of them do, you get the odd one or two who don't want to know but you get that, but after a while they all muck in, and they all seem quite happy and that.' Greg

His observations of some of the young people are that the commitment grows, and that when they begin at the project there are some that have that commitment and interest right from the start, while others, who are perhaps just observing from the sidelines, begin to get involved through their contact with others and through actions. For Greg this 'throwing yourself in' and getting involved is essential to get the most from the situation, make the connections with others and get hooked in. 'After you get more involved and you think that it ain't too bad in the back of your mind and then do a bit more and a bit more and you start to enjoy it you got, I think you got something to wake up to, something to look forward to in the morning'. Greg.

In a meeting with young people who had been through the project, they talked about what the project meant for them and Ash, one of the young people said: 'I always felt I could come back here at any time if I wanted. I never felt, for a minute that the gates were shut permanently, I could come down here and start working..' For him although he did not need to be a close part of the Project 'community' he knew if he wanted or

needed that community, it was there for him. A space or community existing in thought or memory and there, if and when needed.

Induction to practice is often through those who have been working there already 'showing them the ropes' as Hal describes; this is what Lave and Wenger (1991) would describe as moving from the 'peripheral participation in the community towards core participation'. This process of induction is used at the Project; young people already working there showing new members how the project works and the basic rules. Jake describes the process:

..... 'when they first come here, .. they were naughty they get talked to and sort themselves out and then they look at me and they, cause that was what we used to be like and then they look up to us. We're doing this.' Jake

For the young people in the project this process gives the established members of the group a sense of importance as holders of knowledge and information which can be imparted to newcomers. Paul talks about young people who have been through the project supporting new young people into the project:

'actually it's powerful, it's when slightly older young people talk to them, they're going to listen much more than they are to me, or Saul, because what you say, really, really comes from the heart.' Paul the Project meeting September 2008

This method of induction, while it can be powerful in involving new people in 'the community', helping them move from 'peripheral participation' to 'core participation' (Lave and Wenger 1991), can also simply reinforce the existing community norms rather than providing an opportunity for challenging or actively transforming communities. This perpetuation of particular attitudes and beliefs can be seen in the way staff are inducted for example, James's sense of being an 'outsider' and having very clear boundaries between 'work' and 'not work' were passed on through his induction of new staff as they joined the project. The communities in and around

the Project are changing all the time, and cut across the generations.

Conflicts and challenges have come to the surface. An example of this has been the reaction of the woman who runs the fish and chip shop to the project trying to do things in the community. The fish and chip shop backs on to the Project, at first she had been fairly supportive of the project but as time has gone on she has verbalised her negative feelings more. She feels that although, on the surface, the Project may be doing positive things, like the planters and cleaning up front gardens in her street; actually, underlying this is a hidden agenda. She has no problems with the young people using the project but she is suspicious of the community involvement. 'I don't want to use it..... Don't think by putting up a few hanging baskets you can win us over.'

Molly

These conflicts can provide opportunities for talking about issues, verbalising, telling the 'stories' to make sense of situations, developing a collective narrative which can be retold (Engerström 1999). These 'stories' can give the participants ownership over the event; give young people a voice and a feeling of being part of a community. Challenging and using language to clarify thoughts and ideas; in this way the 'story telling' enables people to verbalise and make their voices explicit. Telling their part in the story of the Project develops the sense of community across a period of time and links the people, passing on information from the previous members who have been through the project, to other newer members. They all hold part of the collective knowledge and history of the project.

Hal, along with a couple of other young people from the project had done two presentations; one to staff within the local authority, and although this was a fairly small meeting, he had felt much more nervous doing this than when he did a presentation for an award. For some of the young people in the project, it is describing, verbalising to others' about what they have done, that reinforces their relationship to a community, Hal describes what he felt about giving the presentation:

‘There weren’t many people but I was just so nervous, I don’t really know why. Everyone just listened to you, that was a major, that was quite a privilege, just really actually, that was good.’ Hal

An example of how roles within a community can change and how they can become accepted as a different member of the community, happened when two young people, Seb and Jake, who had been through the project, were asked to work as part of the staff team working with a new group of young people. Seb, like Hal and Jake had articulated and verbalised his experiences of the project for different audiences and he insists that one of the key aspects he has gained from the project was resilience. For Seb and Jake, being trusted and getting respect, being part of a ‘community’, were very important. Seb came back to the project as a volunteer, after a job came to an end, and he had secured a place on a youth work training course. Jake likewise had left the project and gone on to work, but was now out of work and waiting for an interview for a youth work post, in another organisation. Both Jake and Seb were asked to help out on a week’s full time course, working with young people in the transition from school to further learning. Seb was able to make the transition from young person to facilitator and Jake, though very quiet and shy was beginning to make this transition. It required them to really consider their roles and relationships with the young people and the staff and to shift from being part of one community to another. For Jake, when he and Hal had tried this before, he could not do it, and reverted back to his position as a young person, but this time he was able to make the transition.

Exploring critical incidents² which reveal aspects of communities

At this point I want to explore some of the critical incidents that have happened during

² *I refer here to a critical incident as an event, transaction or moment of significance, which has raised questions either about my own beliefs, values, attitude or behaviour, or those of people in the project something that made me or them stop and think.*

my research with the Project, and which have had repercussions across several different 'communities of interest' giving me insights into some of the behaviours, attitudes and feelings that are important to people in the Project.

A racist remark?

The project had built a room for the local community; this had been funded through a local organisation, managed by a board of mainly local people. As part of the development of the rooms a small committee had formed to help steer and plan.

One Friday, when working at home, Paul received a call from the chair of the board to talk about an 'incident'. This turned out to be a complaint made by a community development worker from the council, following, what was meant to be, a supportive meeting about the next stages of the room. Many phone calls and e-mails followed. At the meeting, it was stated that Louise had made racist comments. Rather than confronting her and tackling it at the time, the community development worker went back to the office and reported the incident to her line manager, who then e-mailed and asked for an apology or they would no longer work with the organisation and by implication possibly the Project. At this stage no one had told Louise that there was a complaint about her. Paul spoke to her and went to see her to tell her what was happening. She was extremely surprised and did not feel she had said anything that could have been seen as racist. She was very clear that she was not one and had always supported and worked with people from many different cultures. This incident, continued to rumble on with the council insisting on a written apology, although they still had not actually talked to the accused person. This incident threw up several, small momentary 'communities', among those who supported each other through this time. This incident could be seen as revealing what Engerström calls 'tensions and contradictions' (Engerström 1999).

What has been learnt from this, if anything? Are the communities still there? Paul deliberately spent time talking with her and others involved in this 'incident', 'mediating', which led to some changes to the communities; which did enable some direct conversations and discussions. She likewise was happy to talk about it and called on some of her 'community' to confirm that she was not a racist. This conflict or contradiction enabled new allegiances to form and a dynamic to challenge attitudes that perhaps had previously been unchallenged.

The community room

It is interesting to look at Louise's relationship with different aspects of the project, and how she has interacted. At the start she was very supportive in a practical way, wanting to know what was going on, being a part of something new happening. She talks very positively about the young people, but she did and still does, see them as 'separate' from her and 'the community'. When the room was finished she immediately wanted to put a lock on the door to 'stop the young people going in there'. Although in other contexts she talks very positively about them. For example, at a meeting she said 'I feel very proud of all the young people, they've done a great job' Louise (Project AGM 2008).

'The community room was..Paul's suggestion in the first place, oh he always wanted to get the community involved in the Project, and I've done my best to get people involved. I tried the yard sales, to raise money for the Project, more than anything. ..I've tried getting people together; can we have a summer party? Could we do this, could we do that, it's been inconvenient, 'cause the boys have been using the Project for different thing so we couldn't do it.' Louise

Louise appears to want both to be in charge, and yet to be able to say it is someone else's responsibility, she felt she was doing it for someone else. Paul and I had talked

often about the dilemmas and ethical issues of going in to a community and ‘helping’ set up a project ‘for’ the community but I had a moment of realisation as I was helping clean the building and prepare for a ‘community event’ (a table top sale) organised by Louise. This was shortly after the official opening of the project, which had involved a lot of time, effort and energy by all those involved, including staff, young people and some members of the community. The young people, in the run up to the event, worked with us, often long into the evening, sweeping up, finishing off the brick weave, painting and the flooring.

Louise had organised and advertised for a table top sale on a Saturday at the Project, and Paul and I went in to help get ready, and set out the tables. I was cleaning inside the building, and Louise was outside. I was feeling rather virtuous and a bit resentful that ‘yet again I had given up some of my precious weekend for the ‘community’. I realised, from comments Louise had made at various stages like: ‘I’m only doing this to raise some funds for the Project’ and ‘I’m only going to do this to get it started’, that she felt she was doing this as a favour to Paul and me. It suddenly struck me, ‘Whose community was it anyway? Who wanted to impose their vision of what it was?’ Or was the sense of community simply those inter-relationships each helping the other, a sense of contributing even if slightly begrudgingly? What right has any one to feel that they can, or should, go in to a community, and impose on it?

The Official Opening

The official opening was the culmination of two years of work and there was a lot of activity leading up to the event. The preparations for this involved several of the young people who had been through the Project, coming back to help, staff and volunteers from the local community also helping out in what Gilchrist (2007) describes as a ‘shared interest’. There were several moments during this process that are worth examining.

The formation of the young people's group, involved those who had been through the project, coming back to discuss what further support they might need, how they could support other young people in the project, and the opening. The young people, who came to the meetings, were not always the same ones. They did not all know each other as they had been involved in the project at different times, and yet they had a shared understanding and there was a sense of 'community'. Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to the notion of 'communities of practice' where people come together around a particular interest. In this instance the young people, staff and members of the local community came together to get the building ready for the opening, or to meet up with other people who have been involved in the project and have shared understandings and experiences. During the meetings they verbalised their stories and shared experiences, as well as identifying what they could do to help towards the opening. They supported each other by allowing time for each to talk and contribute. It was during the second meeting, when Henry, a volunteer from the local community, joined the group because he had seen the light on, and chose to share his 'story' of his transition from troubled youth to adulthood, with the group. The young people, most of whom did not know him, listened and allowed him into their 'community' acknowledging a shared understanding and attachment. This could be seen as similar to Willmott's (1989) idea of community of shared interest where common experiences or interests can provide a strong bond.

On the day before the opening, the incident between Louise and Hal, in which Hal's calm reaction to a shouted command and the conversation afterwards with Paul about why this had happened, enabled Hal to reflect on the event and learn from it. His sense of being part of the 'Project community' and knowing that the contribution he was making was recognised and appreciated; enabled him to put the incident in perspective.

The Annual General Meeting (AGM)

The community support group was initially formed to set up the community room and get the community involved in activities. Over the time, tensions in this community group have emerged. The officers (Chair, secretary and treasurer) while happy to come along to events, were not interested in taking a central role or in engaging wider communities, while some of the wider group were pleased to have more happening at the project. Outside of the group some of them were expressing their feelings about the officers and their apparently negative attitude to the 'community' but did not feel confident to challenge them: 'I will only go along to a meeting when Paul, George or you are there. It's always so negative when one of you isn't there.' (Eleanor).

I helped set up an Annual General Meeting (AGM), with new candidates proposed for the officer posts and a blind voting system in place. At this point the existing officers, stood down and the new people were voted in. While everyone was positive to each other, there was a palpable sense of relief amongst the wider committee. Since the event the original treasurer has been very positive and is clearly relieved to have the responsibility of the project lifted from her. She has chosen not to get involved in any of the events and activities since the meeting; while new people have been coming in and new communities of interest have developed. This links to Lave and Wenger's concept of 'communities of practice' (1991) in this instance the old communities have shifted and new ones formed around common activities and interests.

Conclusion

Communities and how people see themselves within and outside of them, constantly change. At times the young people in the Project saw themselves as a community, sometimes it was with members of the wider community, as one or two 'friends', or a group working specifically on a job. Living in a geographical area does not mean people

will have contact with each other or have a sense of community (Lee and Newby 1983). Likewise members of the community around the project saw themselves in different 'communities of interest', the pottery group, family drop in and all the other myriad of communities that we all feel inside or outside of (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998).

What is important is the process, through which people are able to look at a situation, reflect and learn from it (Engerström 1999). This dynamic approach is one that fits well with a youth and community work perspective, with the process and not the product. For many people having a shared interest or common goal galvanised their sense of community and feeling of purpose. The research data has identified some of the complexities of individuals and communities, highlighting the importance of identifying the particular learning from each situation, and the significance of verbalising to others, so that the moment is captured. Tensions and contradictions (Engerström 1999) occur and can provide opportunities for new and unexpected solutions to issues, for example in the preparation for the opening or the AGM. Communities change and roles within them change and adapt, they can be momentary (Fraser 1999) and as they shift new tensions, contradictions and solutions can appear. The different communities within and around the project seems to have provided opportunities for people from different ages ranges to meet, work and learn from each other. This 'informal' learning in and across communities as individuals participate in actions gives the catalyst for new possibilities, insights, it is a dynamic process not static, where people and situations are constantly changing (Barton et al. 2000). In the next chapter I explore intergenerational practice and learning. This theme emerged both through the literature on learning and communities and also through the intergenerational aspects of the interactions and learning linked to the Project.

Chapter 7

Intergenerational practice and learning

In this chapter I explore the theme of intergenerational practice and learning, an aspect of the Project that people often talked about. Hatton-Yeo (undated) talks about the importance of 'thinking intergenerationally'; to explore what happens in communities and as a framework to support change. Lloyd (2008) highlights the point that it is often through families and communities that values and beliefs are reinforced and upheld or challenged from generation to generation.

This transfer occurs in and across communities and between generations, for some of the people in the Project this is an important aspect, giving them a sense of being part of something. I found in my study that there were many links between the interactions in and across the different communities and generations. There were examples of intergenerational practice; young people, staff and members of the community came together at events, as part of activities and meetings where there seemed to be a transfer of knowledge, skills and understanding. This concept I felt, was important because it recurred in many of the stories, observations and in the literature. The Project appeared to provide some of these natural opportunities for learning across the generations. In the following section I look at the literature and explore some of these opportunities around the Project.

Intergenerational profile of the Project

In this section I will briefly outline the profile of the Project and surrounding area in relation to the ages of the people involved, as well as discussing the interactions that take place between these generations inside and outside of the Project.

The area around the Project still has a mix of generations and age groups living in the neighbourhood, but not necessarily taking part in activities together. The Project brings together many different people from the community from a range of age groups, who often find themselves interacting with people of various generations throughout their involvement in the Project. These daily exchanges between the generations are examples of mutual respect and learning from each other. It is important to note that everyone involved in these exchanges learns and gains from them. Although there is often the assumption that the young learn from their elders, it is also true that older people learn from younger generations. An example of this was when sitting with a member of staff and two young people discussing the tasks for the day, Greg (who is in his seventies) arrives and joins the discussion, sharing his knowledge and listening to the ideas of the group. The exchange is respectful and shows a sharing of ideas and knowledge from everyone involved; both young and old.

The Project, through working out in the local community and involving local volunteers in different aspects of the Project, has developed opportunities for intergenerational exchanges to take place. Slowly the range of people from the local community involved in the Project has expanded, from the original group of volunteers, all of whom were retired, to three generations involved in different aspects of the Project.

Separation between generations and opportunities for exchanges across the generations

In this section I am going to explore the separation between generations, how differences across the generations are sometimes portrayed and how these help or hinder intergenerational exchanges and relationships.

Granville (2002) highlights some of the changes in patterns of family and community

life, which can result in less contact between different generations and cause this lack of intergeneration exchange. Granville also points out that there can be a tendency for policy interventions and services to be targeted at specific groups and therefore, by implication, not at others. In this way policy and service provision can sometimes enhance or reinforce this separation of generations. It is also interesting that these two groups, 'youth' and 'elderly', generally speaking have few natural and meaningful opportunities to come together. Hatton-Yeo and Watkins (2004) highlight a reduction of opportunities for different generations to interact together in everyday situations and this can result in a sense of distance, mistrust and alienation between generations. Perhaps it would be useful to explore some of the reasons behind this separation.

It seems as if the distancing between generations comes from a lack of opportunity for contact and positive interactions, which is likely to result in negative attitudes about 'the other'. A recent report in 'Young People Now' (2005) showed that negative attitudes towards young people are more likely to be held by those with little social contact with young people and that those with more contact tended to have a much more positive view of young people (Young People Now 2005). This suggests that lack of contact with other generations can lead to more negative perceptions about them.

Where there are no real interactions between certain generational groups the perceptions of other groups often come from images portrayed through the media. There are often polarised and negative images of 'youth' and the 'elderly' in the media which depict young people as perpetrators of anti-social behaviour, members of gangs and involved in crime (Valentine 1996; Worpole 2003). While older people, are often, portrayed as a burden or as victims (Bytheway 1995). These can give a very one sided and non representative pictures of communities and can lead to a sense of an increasing division between generations (Giles et al. 2002).

As Brown (1995) and McKendrick (1997) show in their research it is important to look at the wider context and influences on people, and often the real views of either older

or younger people are more complex and positive than those portrayed through the media. Pain (2005) explores the way in which space, identity and age are closely linked, spaces can be associated with particular age groups, and take on age identity, and identities of different groups of people are constructed in society and these can be very difficult to de-construct. This is certainly born out through the attitudes of those living close to the Project, as my research data demonstrated a much more positive and open attitude by the majority of people to those across the generations. My research found that the majority of those interviewed were supportive of the 'other' young people and identified with them, and equally the young people were respectful of the members of the community they had had contact with through the Project. Their views of others did not immediately categorise them by popular stereotypes.

It is important also to note the complexities of social identities and the implications of these. The concept of social identity implies that people see themselves and others around them in terms of generational difference or sameness. As Pain (2005) highlights:

'Intergenerational relations are produced by a complex range of factors at individual, family, community and societal levels. They are forged through social and bodily practices and interactions, in relation and sometimes in opposition to each other.' (Pain 2005: 10-11).

I am going now to look at how people from different age groups have been involved in some of these practices and interactions through initiatives and decision making about their communities.

Taking an active part in decision making or being 'done to'

I want to explore next how people have been included or excluded from decision making processes and how this can impact on communities and intergenerational

interactions. Regeneration initiatives have increasingly recognised the value of involving older and young people in decision making: partly because they are more likely to live in deprived communities, but also because they have less social capital, and because neighbourhoods are particularly important for older people and children (Scharf et al. 2003; Matthews et al. 2000). The involvement of older people in the regeneration process has increased over the last ten years, as Riseborough and Jenkins (2004) identify, however young people remain less involved and their views less represented. Gaskell (2005) highlights how young people often feel that their views are not given respect by the decision makers in their communities. Whilst Fish (2005) and Hatton-Yeo and Watkins (2004) identify the successful results of projects which deliberately aim to include 'hard to reach' or disaffected young people, and where participants, or their representatives, were involved in planning from the start.

This aspect was evident from the Project, where young people had been involved from the start in planning, decision making, and meeting professionals, for example the architect, planning officials, the heating engineer etc as well as the practical clearing and building. The young people expressed real pride in having contributed to the Project, and were often able to identify their specific work. The literature points to the importance of involving young and old in decision making so that their views are taken notice of and that they can make a positive contribution to their communities. In the following section I want to explore the opportunities for both intentional and unintentional exchanges across the generations, linked to the Project.

The growth of intergenerational practice and learning within the Project

There are key aspects connected with the ideas in the literature that I want to explore through the data. In the following sections I will start by identifying some of the

intergenerational exchanges and learning in and around the Project. Then I will look at some of the intended and un-intended opportunities for Intergenerational learning. Finally I will identify some of the important aspects of the process of intergenerational transfer and learning for young people and older people.

Intergenerational exchange and learning in and around the Project

I will begin by describing the opportunities for intergenerational exchange before the Project was set up and go on to look at the changes to these opportunities once the Project was brought to the community.

There are some regular physical exchanges and practices in and around the Project which result in intergenerational interactions and learning. Probably the one that all households are involved in, is putting out and taking in the bins, while the dumping of rubbish down the alleyways and the occasional wheelie-bin fire, unites some residents in opposition to others. There is a small local shop where people meet, but exchanges are usually brief, one or two people stand outside their front doors for a cigarette and talk across the wall, but there are no real opportunities to come together to take part in activities together. Initially most people in the community around the Project, while not being 'hostile' to a new project and 'outsiders' coming in, kept their distance. It was over time that some became involved and the opportunities for intergenerational exchange and learning grew through this. With no existing community building or reason to come together, members of the local geographic area did not seem to have a sense of community:

'I mostly keep myself to myself, the only people I talked to round here were my neighbours and I would say hello to people in [the local corner shop].' Eleanor

The original Project community group, who were brought together to develop community involvement and use of the community rooms at the Project, formalised some of the community involvement. It was Louise and her husband Vernon, who, as Louise says of themselves, 'we were the nosy neighbours' and came round to ask what

was going on. It was from there that they supported: providing a supply of water, cups of tea and the use of their toilet at the beginning. George worked with them to help bring together the community group, their neighbours, people they knew as friends or acquaintances and to help put together a bid for some funding to establish the community rooms. As the Project developed, the original remit of it to work with young people aged 16-24 years expanded, and a wider range of people from the local community became involved.

This process took time, talking with people at events, handing out fliers and explaining what the Project did, as well as providing planters for local gardens, establishing workshops, courses and events for and with local people. Slowly people became involved, offering to help with caretaking, helping at events, with plants, donating items for table top sales, offering to share skills. Terry, a member of the community group, after one of the weekend events said, 'I really looked forward to the open day. I got up on Sunday and realised I'd got something to get up for.' Another member of the community is Henry, his family have slowly got involved, with three generations taking part in aspects of the project. His grandson, Tod, on a Work Skills course, his daughter and a friend of hers on a parenting course, his wife, Sarah involved in the community group and supporting the work that Tod and her daughter are doing at home. Here the Project is showing a change within the local area in terms of intergenerational interactions; it has provided a space for a sense of community to develop and has produced various situations in which people of all ages interact and learn from one another. It is important to note that this change has also affected interactions between generations outside of the Project itself and within the local community.

Intended and un-intended opportunities for Intergenerational learning

As in the debate about formal, informal and non-formal learning there is the question of whether intergenerational practice has to be intentional to be meaningful and what

transforms an exchange or event into something we learn from. In this section I will explore this debate using examples from my research.

Many of the intergenerational interactions and learning at the Project at the start were unplanned, but recognised and externalised through conversation and the learning drawn out by staff after the events. An example is when Ryan, who lives in a children's home, had been working at the Project for about a year. He had developed from being a young person who was disengaged from education, (constantly 'bunking off school') to being highly motivated, thinking about the preparation of the tasks he had to do. He was often at the Project before anyone else during the run up to the opening. He was working with Henry, a member of the local community in his seventies, who had got involved in the project through the community support group and then volunteered to help get the building finished for the opening. The intergenerational working relationship was really important for Ryan: 'Henry's great; he really knows his stuff.' He worked one to one under the guidance of Henry, listening to explanations, being shown what to do. He respected his expertise and experience and was able to identify afterwards some of the aspects of that relationship that were most important: 'Henry showed me what to do; he trusted me to do the work.' This intergenerational interaction and learning was unintended, but came about through circumstance and resulted in very positive outcomes for both men.

Another example of where the intergenerational learning was un-intentional for Ryan was with Louise who he sometimes found a challenge. She came to the Project while he was helping get the building finished for the opening and told him what to do. Ryan was able to keep his concentration on the job in hand, weighing up how he should react and keep the criticism in perspective. He was able to talk about it afterwards, to shape and frame it to be able to use it in other situations, showing some important learning; to understand and interact appropriately with other generations.

Ryan started going along to join two members of staff and other adults to play pool once a week, and for a long time he was on the periphery, being there but not being a

‘fully fledged’ member of the group. As time went on, he became more accepted and each Tuesday he would tell Paul how he got on the evening before. For Ryan this acceptance into an adult group where he was treated as an equal was a very important step as he moves from adolescence to adulthood. Again, this learning and interacting with other generations was not an intentional process but something which occurred through circumstance.

These three examples of intergenerational exchange that Ryan was involved in, show some of the subtle differences and shifts between practice and learning. The ethos of the Project, learning through experiences, was drawn out by the staff through conversations, feedback and discussion. In some respects the learning then, is not necessarily identified at the start, it is drawn out in retrospect, reflecting on what has happened. Intergenerational learning, as with learning in other contexts, does not have to be intentional at the beginning but can be identified, recognised and crystallised later on. Working one-to-one with Henry, gave Ryan concentrated time, the opportunity to learn new skills, and respect for someone older than himself. For Henry, who like many of the young people, is more interested in practical work, struggles with literacy and has had ‘scrapes with police’, he felt a real sense of pride in working with Ryan, passing on his expertise and teaching him some new skills. For both Ryan and Henry, this learning and sharing process was not something they had intended prior to the experience, however, now looking back on it, they are both able to identify some important learning that they have gained from this intergenerational experience.

As the Project developed, it involved working in and around the community more, which meant that there were increasing opportunities for the young people to encounter members of the community. This was through specific work, for example, working on a local garden, planting up planters in front gardens, helping with events or in the community rooms. One example mentioned previously, in the first section, is the interactions that occurred between an elderly volunteer, Greg, and one particular young person, Hal. At first they did not interact with one another, but as time went on they began to interact more and enjoy each other’s company and the learning they

gained through this interaction.

The Project, while recognising these interactions as important, was not initially planning them as part of the programme, rather staff were encouraged to use reflective conversation and discussion with the young people to draw out the learning from encounters and situations. At the end of each day, the group would discuss and reflect on what had happened and there were often many unintended learning outcomes brought out through these discussions. As the importance of these intergenerational learning and exchanges has been recognised by the Project staff, they have become more conscious of making sure there are planned opportunities as well as drawing out and reflecting on the spontaneous interactions.

Important aspects of the process of intergenerational transfer and learning for young people and older people

Here I would like to draw on some of the aspects that people involved in the Project felt were most important in terms of the process of intergenerational transfer and learning. I will use some examples of interactions that I have observed and discussed with people involved in the Project.

This initially unplanned transfer across the generations has involved learning for young people, staff and for members of the community. These volunteers from the local community, have been drawn to the Project, wanting to share a skill, feel a sense of worth and sometimes because they recognise and empathise with the young people.

The first example is an observation of the way Henry, who is seventy two and retired, has become involved, first of all helping decorate the Project ready for the opening and then afterwards, when he was keen to continue his involvement. Henry worked with Ryan on various Projects. As they worked together, Henry carefully explained the

details of each job and how to complete the task at hand. Ryan, who has had few male role models and certainly not a grandfather figure, listened attentively and respectfully. He watched and then tried himself under the guidance of Henry. Although Henry is not a teacher, he has worked in a variety of roles. His own life experiences, which started with a troubled youth, has given Henry an insight into young people's lives and the need for them to be treated with respect. Henry and Ryan worked together as a team and constantly checked with each other about the work. There are various learning outcomes from this for both men, but the underlying themes seem to be respect and collaboration.

Henry has talked to Paul about his own difficulty with reading and writing, something which many of the young people also find challenging. Similarly, another older volunteer, Greg, has talked about how he learns best from doing rather than from books. It is interesting that some of the first people from the community to get involved with the Project have perhaps been drawn because they understand from their own life experiences, how the young people think and behave. In their own youth, they might well have been classified as 'NEET'. Both have become more and more involved and prepared to share their skills and knowledge with the young people.

For Naomi and her husband Charlie, supporting and being a role model for the young people was one of the aspects that interested them in the first place. They too had spent long periods of time on benefits and out of work and understood how this de-skilled and de-motivated them. Naomi talks about her approach, getting in there, mucking about, having fun while working; making the young people feel at ease:

'They couldn't really work out how we, we were on the same wavelength as they was on and yet be at the same time, the responsible adult.' Naomi

This involvement and the benefits of intergenerational exchange are not a one way process; the older generations who are involved in the project have been able to learn from the experiences too, for Naomi she gained experience and confidence which she

could use in other situations:

‘I got loads out of it I did. .. Then I had the confidence to apply for my position, I got that because of my experience of working with the youngsters at the Project.’ Naomi’s experience of volunteering at the Project with the young people helped her value her skills and overcome her concern that lack of formal qualifications would be a barrier to work: ‘And its’ amazing ‘cos I did not think that, with out of 44 candidates, that it would be me. I thought I’ve got no experience, I haven’t got all of these lovely qualifications , you go to university and get all these lovely letters after their names and that. I’ve just got some common sense and a way to relate to them and that’s all that’s needed and that.’

As suggested in previous sections, it is clear that the learning and benefits go both ways. This is also true for the organisation staff and volunteers. By being responsive to the shifting communities, the different needs, interests and ideas intergenerational working identifies; as well as having to be responsive and adaptable to the changing requirements for funding, means that the Project and staff have to constantly review, reassess and respond to these sometimes competing demands. It can be argued that the majority of issues are multigenerational in nature, i.e. they impact on more than one generation. Therefore, solutions that involve the different generations will be more effective and sustainable. In the experience of the Project intergenerational learning has been shown to provide purposeful learning activities which bring together young and older people to learn with and from each other.

While these exchanges, on the whole appear to have positive effects, providing opportunities for learning, it is also important to look at some of the potential issues which can arise.

Interactions as catalysts for learning and change or reinforcing the status quo

In this section I want to explore how interactions and conflicts can reinforce the status quo or can be catalysts for change and learning, providing opportunities for talking about issues, verbalising to make sense of events (Engerström 1999). Interactions in and across communities and generations can raise issues of confidentiality and unwelcome interconnections. Such as when a young person speaks confidentially about an issue they wish to keep private, but which is later communicated back to others involved in the situation. An example of this was when Ryan talked to his key worker, Naomi, at his care home, explaining that he loved the Project but there was one woman he found difficult, who 'bossed me about'. He felt however, that he could cope with this conflict and explained: 'I could get on with what I was doing and didn't let it bother me'. Later on Naomi told Paul this and he realised that Ryan's story had gone straight back to Louise (Naomi's mother). These inter-connections across small communities could bring very real and unwelcome challenges and conflicts, as well as more positive connections. In situations such as the example given above, the young person could feel disempowered by the fact that others had shared their conversation and had additional information about the community.

Where young people have had negative or disjointed experience of family life or community, this wider intergenerational transfer appeared to give a structure and offer a different model from which to look at experiences and make choices:

'..when I was little I was adopted, .., my adoptive parents didn't treat me very well, so in the end I decided to go to my Mum, but that didn't work out so I was out on the streets I was getting into trouble, getting in and out of trouble. Well I hung around with the wrong people and I just in the end, I just, my last time in prison I, I just decided I needed to change my life around. I went to [the sheltered house] and then I met the guys at the Project and then from the Project. [the Project] gave me more self belief and I knew that people actually wanted to help me. I've seen what I could lose if I do get in to trouble, so now it's not really worth it. I just try to help the other guys not to do it.' Seb

For Seb, having older role models through the Project, gave him a structure and opportunity to be supported to try out different skills, to talk and discuss. This has given him the desire to do the same for other young people. He identifies that he wants to support others to reflect and learn from their experiences, interactions and conflicts. These intergenerational exchanges provided opportunities to learn from and to deal with conflict (Engerström 1999); resolve differences and cope with challenging situations through discussion, conversation and reflection on what has happened. Brookfield (1987) argues that critical thinking is an important element to learning and questioning events, while the same situation without reflection could reinforce existing perspectives and maintain the status quo (Boud 1985; Schön 1983).

This transfer of knowledge, skills and attitude across different generations used to be, and still is for some families and communities, the norm. Where people, young and old are able to work and live with each other, it can give them insights into other people's lives, to understand and respect different perspectives, opinions, and helps raise debates leading to self questioning, a view that is reflected by the older people involved in the Project Greg talks about the young people and how he sees the way they behave and respond to the community: 'All the lads I've met here [The Project] are alright and always polite.' Greg (The Project AGM 2008)

The involvement of young people and feeling of being respected and listened to is clearly central to how they feel about and respond to those around them.

For Seb as well he talks about being listened to and respected:

'Being listened to ..I think it's because, it's because the staff they know where I'm coming from and they know each individual's circumstances and .. they, they know how to handle people .. what you want to do .. so it's not more a group it's more one to one. ... it's respect and it's also trust as well. A lot of the staff, put in and they trust you.'

Seb

Young people have been involved in all aspects of the project, from clearing, building and planning; this involvement gives them a real sense of ownership and pride (Fish 2005; Hatton-Yeo and Watkins 2004). An example of this at the Project is where young people met with the architect before the plans had been finalised, to share their ideas and contribute to the final solution. From his experience of interacting with and working in the community Seb felt much more comfortable about talking to a wide range of people in different contexts and making the initial contact:

‘I find it better talking to, talking to people and .. approaching people. ... also hearing other groups, having a lot more respect for things I don’t know much about. A few years ago I would have ignored it and now you, now it’s good to hear from different people’s backgrounds.’ Seb

He still finds this daunting at times but has found that if he talks honestly, the reaction is usually positive:

‘They are scary but... if you just say what you think ... that’s what people like really ..’cause it comes from my heart ...before, I used to be quite quiet .. and then I never used to open up to no one, and but now I feel much easier now and that in front of people. It feels better; I can mix with people much better, from different generations. Also how you talk to, you talk differently from younger generation to the older people. Obviously the older people you’re more respectful because they’ve been there. Respect the olders. Talk to them normal.’ Seb

For Mark this experience of working with people of different ages was important, he felt that he learnt something from each of them and that it helped him develop his understanding of different perspectives and experiences:

‘[Having people involved of different ages was] ‘a help ‘cause you learn bits off people of all different ages, they all know different things, so you learn a bit here there and

everywhere, cause I was learning things every day I was down here. Not doin' the same thing every day, if you know what I mean, it was a bit adventurous and that. Cause you're not sitting there doing the same job and that get boring. Whereas we was doin' bits and bobs and that doing different things every day.' Mark

Building those relationships slowly and seeing that adults can take on different roles, is important for the young people at the Project.

Capturing the learning

In this section I will look in detail at some of the aspects related to intergenerational learning and the literature that goes with these. I will begin by looking at using tangible outcomes from learning and go on to look at other aspects such as relationships, including intergenerational relationships, the participatory approach used by the Project and other outcomes and aspects of the learning process.

Many of the people involved in the Project talk about gaining a sense of achievement through seeing the tangible results of their work, for example the finished roof and planters. For some it is being able to show these to, and explain to others that give them a sense of achievement. While for others having a recognised qualification or evidence of what they have done gives them currency in other contexts. For a project like this one, working in and with the community and young people, where the contexts and opportunities are constantly shifting and evolving, capturing learning needs to be flexible. Sometimes, through reflection, the learning becomes clear during or after the event, rather than at the start.

On top of these personal perspectives of what the learning achievements or outcomes are, it is important to look at the wider process. Intergenerational and multigenerational approaches mean that it is useful to look at the community as a

whole, looking at each generation within the context of its relationship with other generations. For one young person, Seb, this contact with people from different backgrounds and perspectives was very important in helping him deal with new situations and gain confidence, together with recognising the gains for others:

‘it’s trying to get that gap between the older generation and the younger trying to get them together. So the older people don’t feel scared to go out ...’ Seb

The Project has taken time to develop and evolve, building relationships with members of the local community and young people and maintaining contact with the young people as they move on through the Project. Despite this, at times the staff still struggle to fully capture and quantify the complexity of the learning that takes place, in and across communities and generations. However, the complexities of capturing hard and soft outcomes have been explored and recognised. (Bernard and Ellis 2004; Hatton-Yeo and Watkins 2004).

It is also important to think about the approach used by the Project and the commitment of all of the people involved. The Project involves people through a participatory approach (Pain et al. 2001) through activities and events, where different generations come together. This practical approach has engaged some people who have not taken up other opportunities. Working with those who have not engaged with other learning opportunities, can be more demanding of time for the staff involved, to build relationships of trust and respect. Sustaining youth involvement in the Project requires a lot of time and careful planning (Fitzpatrick 1998). The Project has taken a long term approach to being involved in the local community and with the young people. The focus on involvement and sense of ownership are vitally important, reflected in the research data, to assess how people feel about their contribution to the Project, to feeling listened to and contributing to developments. The importance and impact of working over the long term has been highlighted by Pain (2001):

‘...for really significant outcomes the contact needs to be long term, ideally with

participants themselves in the driving seat.’ (Pain 2001:30)

An example of how the Project provides opportunities for young people to continue to be part of the project and contribute to decision making is through the young people’s group; where, they share what they are doing, issues and dilemmas, contribute to the project and enjoy time together, this long term approach is important. Ashok, who was involved in the project early on and left to go on to a college course talks about how he still feels supported:

‘I know I can always come back and talk, the door is always open.’ Ashok

A final point to note in the Project's work with young people is that the involvement of the young people is ever-changing and is never something that can be plotted and worked out prior to their actual involvement. The trajectory of many young people is not straight forward and often they find they come up against a problem: they lose their job, relationships breaks down, or they are homeless, and coming back to the Project gives them a fixed point where they know they will have someone who they can talk to. For some they have become involved in the Project again, after leaving, through working as a volunteer. Jake recently came back to the Project, he had been made homeless and his part time job had come to an end. Paul was able to offer him the chance to do some voluntary work in partnership with a building company, working alongside older and experienced staff. After two weeks he was offered the chance of paid work with the company:

‘When I was homeless, I knew I could call in and talk. Paul offered me the chance to work, doin’ up a fire damaged flat. I realised I’d really missed having something to do. Getting’ up every morning and having to be somewhere.’ Jake

For Jake, like many people involved in the Project the learning from these experiences can be significant but can also be hard to quantify or fully capture.

In this section I have outlined some of the opportunities for and some of the complexities of capturing the learning from intergenerational interactions drawing

from examples from the Project.

Conclusions

As with communities, intergenerational exchanges and learning are complex, not fixed but dynamic. They need to be explored, and the specific needs of all the people involved have to be considered, so as not to impose solutions on communities but to involve people in decision making and problem solving. This is complex and time consuming. There is relatively little research on intergenerational relations at community and neighbourhood levels. It is important to realise that the way people relate across generations in neighbourhoods appears to be different from those within the family. Intergenerational exchanges appear to provide valuable opportunities for learning between and across generations. These seem to be most effective where they include natural opportunities, with a common goal or cause. For example the opening of the Project, where people came together to get the building finished, brought together many generations to achieve a shared objective. Contributing together, valuing each others' contribution and working with relationships of trust, gives opportunities to learn about and understand self and others and develop positive relationships (Hatton-Yeo and Watkins 2004). It brings new relationships for communication and learning, which appear to give people new insights and understanding within and across communities, sometimes unexpected and for some pushing them into situations they would have otherwise found scary, for example talking to new and different people.

The Project has been developing a more planned ethos of involving different generations and building on the initially unexpected encounters. These can provide opportunities to challenge preconceived ideas about others; conflicts can be positive catalysts for change (Pain 2005). The benefit of these interactions are varied and wide ranging and can provide opportunities for real understanding of others and for

reflecting on and resolving conflicts.

In the next chapter I explore the fourth key theme in this thesis, that of transitions and identity, and how young people move from adolescence to adulthood and begin to engage with work or training.

Chapter 8

Emerging theme: Identity and learning for work

In this chapter I explore the final key theme that emerged from the research data, that of the development of identity and how young people find motivation and direction, including vocational direction. As before I will firstly identify concepts and debates from the literature and then use these to interrogate the research data.

Emerging personal and professional identities

A key concept I want to explore in this chapter is the transition from adolescence to adulthood and the links between the development of personal, professional and vocational identity. Pile and Thrift (1995) explore the way young people move from adolescence to adulthood and as part of this process they begin to define their sense of self, explore who they are, and identify differences between themselves and others. Recent research in neuroscience (Blakemore and Frith 2005) has confirmed the belief that young people take a long time to mature (Muuss 1996; Steinberg 1999) and that the brain continues to develop well into the twenties.

Erikson (1968) explored the development of personal identity which he argues is often very closely related to professional or vocational identity. Kroger (1986, 2007) identifies the complex choices and difficulties young people face in gaining skills, qualifications and employment, making it harder to move from the stage of dependence to independence. Personal and professional identities and the journey into adult life and work are complex, and many young people move from one thing to another; often taking non-linear paths. Finding this vocational direction and meaning has been identified as being a significant factor for young people (Vondracek and Porfeli 2003). Kroger (2007) highlights some key aspects: individual interests, talents, family relationships, peer groups, social class and political contexts, all of which influence and

play a part in vocational decision making and choices. For many young people this process is complex and takes a long time (Furlong 2009). This complexity of finding personal and professional identity is certainly an aspect that comes through my research data; many of the young people have some ideas about what they want to do but these are not always realistic and often they do not have a clear idea about the steps required to reach their goal.

Pemberton (2008) identifies the impact of family support or lack of it on later interest and engagement with learning. Informal support networks, often provided by families and friends can give opportunities to experience different work contexts and get advice and this is highlighted by Gracey and Kelly (2010). Where these networks are not available or are negative young people look for them through other networks (NFER 2009). The data from many of the young people at the Project echoed this; support from their family was often negative and they had to look elsewhere for this guidance. They often describe lack of parental boundary setting, support and praise, and in particular often the lack of a father figure. The Project, through intergenerational interactions and learning tries to provide informal opportunities for young people to encounter different perspectives, share experiences and have new role models.

From my research I would suggest that for the young people at the Project very few are clear about what they want to be, for many of them this journey of identity development, discovering interests and career paths takes a long time and requires trial and error and some luck. Jake for example talks about the importance of key role models to him at the Project as he moves into the adult world of employment: 'when I come to the Project [Paul] he just made me feel I could talk to him and ask questions. I weren't scared of trying things out. He helped me out when I went for the interview as a youth worker; he asked me questions and made me think.'

Schuller and Watson (2009) highlight some of the economic, social and political changes that they argue have made the transitions through different life stages more complex than in previous times. For young people moving through adolescence to

adulthood and finding a direction can be very confusing and challenging. Many of the young people at the Project try out several different pathways before finding something that they are interested in. The pathways of employment for many people change significantly, often moving across different jobs and into and out of employment, training and learning opportunities (Schuetze 2006). With greater diversity has also come increasingly complex choices and uncertainty for young people (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Beck 1992). In recent research (Danielson, Lorem and Kroger 2000) comparing attitudes and identity formation among different groups of young people, (unemployed, employed, and students) found that there were very different approaches to vocational decision making between these groups. But all the groups of young people viewed work as the most important to their sense of identity and worth. This is certainly borne out by my research data; almost all of the young people at the Project felt that positive experience at work gave them a sense of worth and self esteem.

Werner and Smith (2001) identify the impact the wider context plays in the developing identities of adolescents including; community, peer groups and family. The role of community involvement, volunteering and working towards common goals has been explored by Flanagan (2004). In my study context, this has resonance with the example of the official opening of the Project where the young people and members of the local community had a very clear focus and tight time scale to get the building finished, there was a real sense of team work and pride in the completed task. Here I begin to look at learning identities in a wider context, in the following section I will go on to look at this in further detail.

Vocational learning identity in the wider context

It is important to acknowledge the impact of the wider social, economic and political contexts on identity and vocational decision making. The process of decision making

and vocational choice and commitment is a dynamic process. For some people this can involve a clear point of change when a vocational direction becomes crystallized, but for others it can be a slow process which involves testing out many different interests (Mortimer et al. 2002).

The massive impact of the wider socio-cultural context on adolescent identity behaviour has been given particular attention by Yoder (2000). Similarly, other notable scholars have pointed to the effect on identity formation caused by curriculum developments, the place of community development, as well as interactions with other generations (McIntosh, Metz, and Youniss 2005; Yates and Youniss 1996). These interactions occur in various different situations in our lives, but particularly and perhaps most commonly through work environments. In the following section I will identify some of the influences that work environment along with working skills, and in contrast, unemployment have on identity.

The influence of work, skills and unemployment on identity

A range of research has explored the effects of long term unemployment on young people as well as observing situations where the skills and interests of young people are not matched to work opportunities, identifying the detrimental impact these can have on self identity, well-being and mental health (Fryer, 1997; Feather and O'Brien, 1986; Patton and Noller 1990). The importance of work experience being linked to the skills and interests of young people, for them to feel recognised and valued (Winefield 1997), is clearly shown in my research findings. Through my research young people and members of the community involved in the Project highlighted the importance of feeling valued and respected and that through the experience at the Project they gained positive work routines and attitudes. However, for some, their home environment does not necessarily help to support this. For example, several of the young people live in households where no one works, there is no regular routine,

where there is alcohol or drug abuse and for some they are the carer of their parent or sibling, and these factors can counter their desire to regularly take part in work activities. This desire to engage with employment and other opportunities is a key aspect of how and why young people make certain choices, which I will go on to explore in the following sections.

Lacking engagement with study and work

Increasingly it is recognised by policy makers that the process of disengagement from learning is a long process and does not suddenly happen, while where young people are disengaged by the age of 16 it becomes increasingly difficult to re-engage them (LSDA 2003). However, in recent research many young people said they valued the opportunity to learn by work experience (NFER, 2009; Gracey and Kelly, 2010). For some, work enables them to become more independent and gives them a sense of self esteem and identity (Maguire *et al.* 2008). An example of this from the Project was Tod a 16 year old, who attended a pre- apprenticeship course two days a week, the course also gave the occasional opportunity to work with other employers and in other contexts. Tod, as he said was 'up for it'; he wanted to get involved in any work experience available, getting a real sense of pride in and self-esteem from the work.

Clearly providing a wide range of opportunities for young people to test out their interests, and develop skills, is crucially important as they progress through the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Many young people require the space, structure, boundaries and support to make the transition into adulthood, employment and training and to develop their vocational identity. This was a key aim of the Project. For those who are defined as NEET, this process can be supported through projects in the community, providing the role models, testing ground and springboards into volunteering, work and training. I will continue on this theme to explore this within the context of my research in the following section.

Developing interest, confidence and engaging in the process of work

In this section I am going to use the ideas from the literature to structure my analysis of my findings. The literature shows that development through adolescence to adulthood is complex and that where young people do not have a strong support structure, the process is harder and takes longer. Personal and professional identity are closely linked and require opportunities to develop self worth, skills and confidence. Also, matching skills to work is very important to developing interest. Engaging with training and work, where previous experiences of education have been negative or where support and family experiences have not been positive, requires a great deal of perseverance. At the Project Paul, the project manager, talks about young people reaching a point of being, 'hungry for work.'

My research data has provided examples of how this process of moving into work is viewed from different perspectives. For many young people engagement and interest in work develops slowly, as they gain confidence and interest as Greg observes:

'Some of them seem as if they want to work .. and the boys up here after a day or two they seem interested. After you get more involved and you think that it ain't too bad in the back of your mind and then do a bit more and a bit more and you start to enjoy it you got, I think you got something to wake up to, something to look forward to in the morning.'

My research found that young people value having the time and encouragement to develop, explore and find what they are interested in. Hal talks about how having the chance to test out his skills and attitudes in a supportive environment helped him work through different options and begin to find his personal and vocational identity. He reflects on his experiences, both positive and negative, of working , which he feels have

helped him find the determination to go on to find something he wants to do, working now as a chef:

‘trying out at the Project, wood work, working on the roof and that, and then at the Junction, when I walked off, I knew I wanted to get a job and that. I went and got a job working in a restaurant in town and really enjoy it, it’s hard work and that.’

One project worker, George, describes what he feels the Project has provided for the young people to support their journey: ‘I just think the Project has been incredibly successful with those young people because, with all the young people who have come into it because they have been given the environment to grow up. And that is the biggest change seen in them. They honestly have matured with that’. This highlights some of the aspects of personal development that the Project aims to encourage through confidence, opportunities and engagement in a range of new activities.

Hal, although he had some support from his family to try out some different work experiences took time to commit himself. Initially he did not really engage and because of that his attitude to work was not positive, he would mess around and get into trouble. It took time to find what interested and motivated him, and it was then that he was ready to make a positive commitment:

‘...before see I was doing nuffin, see I did work but I just didn’t want to do it, It was just making money and I got in trouble a lot and one thing I started coming here and I started to enjoy it.’

Almost all of the young people at the Project talk of wanting to work; they clearly see work as a way of defining who they are, and giving them a positive status. However at times their expectations can seem unrealistic. For example, one young person at the Project talks of wanting to work on the rigs (his father works on them), but his ability to concentrate even for short time spans on a simple task is limited and when discussing the steps he will need to achieve his goal, he quickly loses interest. For others they

clearly feel a real sense of purpose and pride when they are working. For example, Hal who was so pleased to have been offered work on a building site, and Jake who was given some work refurbishing a flat. Jake reflects: 'I just feel so much better, I've got something to do. Got a reason to get up.' Clearly this engagement with work provides an important aspect of young peoples' motivation to engage, but a deeper part of this is also the aspect of gaining self-confidence and feeling respected by others and self. In the following section I will explore how the support around young people can help to develop a positive identity.

Developing identity - being respected and trusted

In this section I will use Hal's story to show how feeling trusted and respected by others can help young people to develop their own sense of positive identity.

Hal had done various jobs before, including some work with his dad and working as a window cleaner. He felt that his attitude to work was different before, and that the ethos of respect for others at the Project helped his attitude to work, and encouraged a more positive outlook:

'Yeah, where we was working before, window cleaning, people there started moaning to each other, so getting me involved, and that used to really annoy me, I remember they keep moaning and getting me involved. And here there's no moaning whatsoever, really.'

In his previous jobs he had felt laughed at and undermined, and in an attempt to preserve his self respect, had switched off from wanting to work. He was aware that he did not like a combative atmosphere: 'They actually used to put me down a lot, where I used to work. And that when I quit, I didn't want to work no more,' Hal

For Hal, what he felt he gained from work and enjoyed the most at the Project, was learning new skills and meeting new people and having a sense of respect for and from

others. The positive work environment gave him the support to develop a work ethic and find what motivated and interested him. This is a common theme that I have observed throughout my research with different young people. Another common theme I will go on to discuss in the following section is the process of learning through practical experience.

Learning through the practical experience and real work

Driven by government priorities, many training providers and provision have become targeted and outcomes focused, with less emphasis on developing practical skills. To counter this, at the Project there is a stronger focus on process and practical, 'hands on' experience. For many of the young people interviewed, it was a sense of achievement through practical activities and skills that motivated them to engage in learning at the Project.

Along with the practical skills development, the Project aims to support the young people through positive interactive experiences; by encouraging, respecting and trusting them to be independent where possible. For Mark, the opportunity to develop a work ethic and the skills of team work, feeling valued, helped increase his confidence and supported the development from 'adolescent to adult':

'For young people, get them in, treat them like an adult from the younger stages and they just get on and then they won't act like kids and so they'll have more confidence so go out and find a job. Doing things like this they can work as a team , not as a, like I can't work with him, just get on case that's what we was taught, me and my mate, work as a team , it was good, not just like I'll do my bit and you do your bit like , to work together.'

Along with respecting young people and providing them with these opportunities, the Project also has to give them a degree of responsibility for their actions, work and

behaviour. For Jake being given responsibility and the realisation that others trust and rely on him and expect him to get on with the work, was very powerful:

‘I don’t know, shocked, cause I never knew anyone one would rely on me. ...Some people don’t give a ... turning up on time; do the work you’ve been asked to do. You gain their trust and they’ll give you more work and things. Cause they think you’re capable of doing it.’ For this young person in particular, realising his own sense of responsibility helped him to be more aware of the relevance of such skills and abilities within real life work place situations.

For many of the young people at the Project, work identity was also about being able to cope with the routines of work, testing out ideas and dealing with the emotional challenges that can arise. Asked about how the Project has prepared him for work Seb replies:

‘Think motivation, getting up in the mornings an’ going to work and also on bad days being able to handle things, you know....trying to cope with people shouting at you, you know, not just staff, but customers, how to control yourself, you know. ...I felt quite proud of myself, proud really.’

He now feels that, having been given the chance to experience different work situations, practical and people centred, including a mentoring role with young people, he is now better prepared for thinking about moving into work. He is clearly much more motivated and interested in going on to further training and work.

‘I want to go into youth work, ... because you could do any sort of job but if you’re not going to enjoy it then it ain’t worth doin’. I want to do something that I’m going to enjoy and helping others that are or are just about to go into or have been in my position I think it’s going to be better option.’

For some young people alongside being treated with respect, what was important was providing something that really interested them.

One young person, Tom, had been at the Project and demonstrated real interest and

skills in mechanics and from there he was offered an apprenticeship at a garage. Over a long process of developing interest, skills and training, Tom now works in a garage and has been there for two years. The initial stumbling block was that the local college, having assessed his literacy and numeracy skills, felt he was not at the level to be accepted on to an apprenticeship and in their view 'he would never be able to achieve that level'. The garage was still very keen to take him. Through Tom's determination to succeed with the apprenticeship, and with support from staff at the Project and the garage encouraging him, he went to the college to improve his literacy skills. The garage continued to give him a placement and once he had successfully achieved the levels of literacy and numeracy required; the college eventually accepted him for the apprenticeship. He has now been working at the garage for over two years, where he has developed his mechanical and work skills and he is in his first year of the official apprenticeship. During that time his attitude to work has developed. There have been times when he drifted and his social interests distracted him from work. Tom talks about how he sees the process of developing through work:

'I've grown up since I've been here, concentrating and not going out with my mates as much, as much as I used to and that. Other people working with you- they're great, nice people; ask each other if they've had a good weekend. [I feel I] can ask questions. I go to college one day a week - to get my grades and get my apprenticeship- working towards becoming a mechanic. Literacy and numeracy was something I wasn't interested in, but something I knew if I wanted to do what I wanted to do I was going to have to get that out of the way, all in one hit. [College was] stressful, but got to get it out of the way. Because of my accident- basically I did it on my own. I went to college 1 day a week to do English and maths- I had the accident in May- everyone else had finished.' Tom

This critical moment for him was when he had a very bad motorbike accident. Scramble racing was his real passion, but when he had the accident he was most concerned that he might lose his place at college and the chance to gain the qualifications in English and maths that he needed to get on the apprenticeship and most importantly his job.

'I had the motorbike accident- 31st May- I was in a race, doing quite well, in second place and the person behind me was quite close. I came off and the person went straight over my stomach....so I was in hospital for twenty days, I think, in the HD [High Dependency] unit, just waiting for myself to get better. First week I was just out cold, asleep and that and started coming round. I was thinking about work, I was worried I'd messed every think up and I didn't know if they'd accept somebody being off for three months so. I just wanted to get back to work; it was that that kept me going. I started work after three months; started back in college got trained up as fast as I could, took the exams and passed, got them out the way. It was a big weight off my shoulders. Now I've started as an apprentice, go to college once a week for two years. There's a lot of course work..' Tom

For this particular young person; he also experienced the support of other people in helping him to achieve his goals, and also in helping him to stay in employment. Learning from and with other people of different ages and in different contexts appears to provide strong ties and links across interests, age ranges and generations. The importance of talking to people of different ages and learning from intergenerational exchanges was highlighted in a discussion group at the Project. The discussion explored how young people feel about communicating with adults and other young people. Many of the young people talked about feeling comfortable talking with adults and several said they preferred talking to adults, that they could gain from their experience and ideas and gain a sense of different identities.

For many of the young people at the Project they have tried out different training options, and vocations, drift and then find another interest. For example Saul tested out a variety of directions, including gardening and drifted for a while, after he left the project. At the last meeting he attended at the Project he said he wanted to go off shore on the rigs but had not really considered the cost of training, time away etc. But when he called in to the Project recently, he had changed, was much more confident and had developed a real sense of purpose. He had just completed six months work

experience in gardening and he was much clearer and more realistic about his interests and ability to work. This developing sense of self confidence through work related learning seems to have been important for Saul as he finds his way towards the world of work. This links to Gracey and Kelly's (2010) research which highlighted the importance of work related learning in supporting young people, particularly those most at risk of dropping out of school, pointing out that this sort of training supports young people in the transition from school to work.

So, for many young people, support from peers, family, friends, other members of the community, or someone they feel they can trust to give them advice and guidance, are really important, particularly through the time of transition. A mentor or trusted person can provide the catalyst for re-engaging in learning (Colley et al. 2003, 2006) but often these relationships of trust can take time to develop. As with the Project, these mentors may be intended members of staff or may be colleagues, community members and volunteers. From the previous investigation within this section, it is clear that a major part of this mentor engagement is about the individual providing support, respect, guidance, and confidence within a training or work setting.

Conclusion

For many young people at the Project, this transition from adolescence to adulthood takes time, a range of experiences and support. The interchange between different generations clearly gave some young people different perspectives and helped them think about things in a different way. For Tom, having older role models and support around him, has enabled him to continue down the path he had identified. Jake, like many other young people, has tried several different pathways and has used the Project as a sounding board as he finds his way through the complex choices and decisions to employment.

Establishing identity, both personal and vocational, can be closely linked and a difficult experience at work or lack of work experience can have a long lasting impact on a young person's sense of identity and confidence. Being respected and having an opportunity to try out work, discover interest and test out ideas are clearly extremely important for young people in developing their identity and sense of self-worth. Identity, like community, is constantly changing and adapting. It is situated in wider social, work and economic contexts. We may have several different identities depending on the community, or situation we are in: at work, with friends, and family, and although the central sense of identity is the same, the way in which we behave, or react in these different situations may be different.

The young people interviewed clearly indicate that they want and respond to provision that matches their interests and skills; this gives them the chance to try out skills and knowledge, and the chance to use them in real opportunities. Structures and systems can alienate rather than include the wide range of skills, interests, and abilities of young people. Often the young people at the project leave, try things out, and come back to the Project to reflect on them. They recognise that it is somewhere they can talk things through and learn from experiences that haven't gone well. Jake, went off to a youth work job and nearly completed his training, but dipped out before the end and lost his job; and George who was about to be offered a job, didn't turn up to a meeting with the potential employer. Both later came back to the Project to reflect on what had happened.

The wider context of family, friends, community, and work etc in which the young person lives, has to be considered in any 'solutions'. To engage young people, particularly those who have not found formal school education a positive experience and to support them through the transitions into work, it is essential that initiatives and provision work from a wealth model, which build on and value the knowledge, experiences and interests of the young person and listens to their views (Tunnard et al. 2008).

In the final section I will bring together these recurring themes, to bring my research together and draw some conclusions.

Chapter 9

Conclusions and moving forwards

The main focus of my research has been on the processes of learning related to the Project for young people, staff, members of the local community and for myself as a researcher. In this Chapter I draw together the key themes and findings from the research process. I revisit each of my research questions in turn: looking at what the data says about how and why learning takes place, how these people and others have changed, how the project has changed, and identifying some of the motivators and barriers to young people engaging in work, employment, training.

What do staff, volunteers, young people and members of the local community perceive as the changes for themselves, since being involved in the Project?

My research found that often the changes perceived were related to changes in the ways they were treated and brought together with other people that they might not normally interact with. However, these changes varied between individuals, and were often very personal or specific. Some of these themes recurred for a few different people. For Greg and Mel and some other members of the community finding a purpose and structure was important, giving them a feeling of self worth. They felt that having something to be involved in within the community had provided a new purpose, had changed their personal lives and affected the way they saw and related to others.

Several of the young people expressed the importance of being trusted and seeing their contribution to the wider project and community valued. For many this was a dramatic change in the way they were treated by others and this gave them a new sense of pride. It gave them the feeling they could achieve something of value, not just to themselves but to a wider community. This was a drastic change in self-perception

for many. For many of the young people it was learning through doing, within a 'safe' environment where they knew they could try things out and make mistakes. This was again a change in their self-image, but also in their perceptions of what they personally were capable of achieving. Clearly, for many involved it was also the less tangible changes that were important, like confidence and self-esteem, feeling that they could try out other challenges and cope better with the knock backs that they might face.

It is also important to note that for some people reflecting on and identifying what had changed for them was challenging. This in itself was a new skill or ability that was a big change to ways of dealing with and gaining from learning experiences. However, for some people, particularly when they could identify a specific example to illustrate the change, this articulation was easier.

What do staff, volunteers, young people and members of the local community perceive as the changes for other people involved in the Project and for the local community?

Reflecting on the changes they saw in others, Louise and Vernon clearly articulate the way in which the young people become more willing to engage with others and are more confident even in the way they hold themselves. Reflecting on their peers, many of the young people could identify changes in others, such as increased confidence. Also, as Hal and Seb noted about their peers, many recognised that they had to be ready themselves to make choices and changes in their own lives. Greg identified how young people became more confident and able to communicate with older members of the community as they became more involved in the Project, while for others this articulation was more difficult.

Clearly there is a wide range of changes that have been identified by the different community members and it is important here to note that these can be extremely wide

ranging due to the nature of the Project and the subsequent personal development and changes that occur.

How has their involvement with the Project changed over time?

What is clear is that involvement in the Project is not static, some people who started off very involved in the Project have moved away. For example, Louise and Vernon clearly saw their role as supporting at the start and then withdrawing as it became more established. Others however have become more involved over time, for Greg, his involvement has increased from giving advice at the start, to running the growing centre, bringing in plants, making up planters, to entering and winning the community project of the year in 2009. Similarly many young people have become more engaged with and involved in the Project as time goes on. Hal was initially on the 'edge' of participation, where he did not feel particularly involved, and was about to be thrown off the Project. He made the decision to stay and make a commitment, to make the most of being at the Project, he shifted from this to the role of mentor for other young people and then moving into employment and coming back to visit, dramatically changing his involvement from peripheral observer, to active and enthusiastic participant.

Again, this question is one with many answers as it relates to something which is very personal and specific to each individual. There have been various different changes for different people, however it is useful to note here that for many of the young people and community members, involvement has increased as the Project's ideas, and programmes have developed.

How do they perceive the Project has changed since it was established?

The many changes that the Project has gone through are perceived differently by everyone, and greater emphasis is put on certain changes by certain individuals. For some the physical change of the building is perceived as important, while others focus on the community involvement and changes in community involvement with the Project.

For some, the Project remains very similar to how it was originally. James sees the Project as something that has evolved whilst retaining its initial remit: 'I think it's still basically the same project, I visited it a few weeks back and it's pretty much the same project, the young people and the building.' For some of the young people involved at the start of the Project who come back, they talk about seeing a real difference in the building and a real sense of pride about how they have contributed. There are photographs of the Project as it developed and young people often comment on what they helped with and how it has developed. 'That were a lot of work, I can't believe we done all that,' Hal commenting on photographs of the roof structure. Simon looking at the photos of when he was involved in the Project commented: 'we put that in, we had to dig a huge hole, you forget all the work we did.' Amongst many of these young people there is a strong feeling that the building itself has developed and changed dramatically from when the Project was first established.

For others, particularly local community members involved in the Project, the change is more about how interactions between people have developed and the changes in the people who have become involved in it over time. For Eleanor, who remained on the edge, supporting Greg with the garden and events, she sees the project developing: 'It's incredible, from what it was. Seeing all these people coming and enjoying themselves [at a family event], young people helping, it makes me proud.' Here there is a variety of changes perceived, but generally most people do feel that in some way the Project has taken on dramatic changes since it was originally established.

What are the influences/triggers for the young people involved in the Project that help them to engage with and step towards the responsibilities of training and work?

Many of the members of the community relate this aspect to their own experiences or those of people they know or family members, many finding some link with the difficulties that many of the young people involved in the Project have. Henry talks about finding his way through a troubled youth, until he made the decision to make a change. This resonates with several of the participants, particularly for Seb, who talks about how he kept getting into trouble until he decided he wanted something else. He also talks about the importance of having a catalyst to support this change. Many of the young people describe wanting something very practical, where they feel they are developing 'real skills' with relevance to the wider context for work and where they feel valued and respected. For some this was being taken out of their usual context, or working with someone from another generation or finding a common purpose, for others it was having the chance to try things and see the work come to fruition.

My journey

My research journey has taken me through many different stages of learning, experience, reflection, despair and elation. Being involved in the Project both as a researcher and participant has meant that I have had to constantly reflect on what assumptions I am making, what lens I am looking at events through.

The way in which my lens has changed through this research, is perhaps best demonstrated in consideration of my changing viewpoint towards the young people involved. When I started the research I made assumptions about how young people might see me in my role as researcher, that they might feel suspicious and unsure about how I might use the information. They were much more open than I had

expected, for them the role of researcher did not appear to be different from what they saw as the role of adult/ youth worker or to have significant implications for them. Most of them said they were happy if I used their own names and did not mind being identified. It made me even more aware that I needed to be very conscious of the potential ethical considerations which they might not have anticipated, for example implications of being identified later, or when they have moved on.

My assumptions with regards to the local community have also been challenged during my research work. Throughout the process I have had to continually reassess my views of those local residents who have been involved with the Project. Initially, I made assumptions about members of the local community being interested in getting involved with the Project, which have subsequently been challenged, and I have even had to question my own motives for being involved in the Project. Was I trying to impose my idea of community? Why should I be accepted into someone else's community? Through the research I found that each member of the community got involved on their own terms and often to support the young people rather than to be more involved in 'their community.' In the same way that for me my community is not particularly the geographical area I live in, but much more around interests and different communities of friendships. Again, like most of the young people, the members of the community who I interviewed or I observed, were happy to be named and did not really anticipate possible issues about being recognised, except one who wanted to keep her identity protected in case her former partner was able to identify where she was. Again this was a reminder of the challenges ethically of ensuring that people involved in my research were aware of possible implications.

How the research has influenced my role, how I am seen.

This research however, has not only changed the way I have viewed those involved in the Project, but has also significantly altered the way in which those same people

perceive me. Through engaging in the research, I have found myself becoming more and more involved in the Project itself, which inevitably has transformed my role within the organisation. At the start of undertaking the research I was only involved in the Project as and when, occasional weekend events and supporting the Project development through applying, for example for funding and report writing. As the research developed I became more involved, working part time in the Project, developing community activities, working with young people on a pre-apprenticeship programme, developing resources and partnerships and eventually full time during the final stages of writing up the research.

I did have some concerns, with regard to how my role as a researcher would change my wider role within the Project. I was very aware that I did not want my role as researcher to distance me or create a barrier between me and the people involved.

As the Project and research has developed however, in fact the opposite has proven to be true, and I have become more involved in the day to day running of the Project. My role has been more as a facilitator rather than as a researcher, taking a participatory approach, I am seen very much as part of the Project: often Greg, calls by in the morning to find out what is happening that day or Wendy, a disabled resident in one of the adjacent houses, calls up from her back garden to ask if I can help her take her shopping inside, whilst Tod seeks me out to talk about relationship problems.

Making an investment in and commitment to the Project, is one of the elements I found central to engaging in the process of learning for all those involved, including myself. Without involvement, we remain on the outside, not fully engaged. For example Greg talks about his slow engagement with the Project, Hal talks about how it was only when he made a commitment that he really gained from the Project. Similarly I had to become fully engaged and committed to the research and the Project and people involved.

Through my direct involvement I have got to know people well and rather than seeing me as an outsider, a researcher coming in to visit the Project, they have seen me as

part of the Project. I have also been conscious, that, while providing information about the research, so that everyone knows about what I am doing, I have not talked about it constantly and my role in the Project as a project worker has been seen, by most of the people involved in the Project, as my main focus.

Thus, in relation to the changing viewpoints of myself and others within the Project, this research has proven to be a constantly shifting and dynamic process, revealing the need for any approach to learning to be equally flexible and adaptable, to capture what is happening.

Reflections on my research methods/ approach/ writing- and what I would do differently

Looking back on this research undertaking, there are various aspects that I would consider changing or doing differently next time. There was perhaps an over emphasis on interviews and observation. While the observation and participatory approach provided rich sources of data, the interviews did not always elicit the depth of reflection hoped for. One solution to this, for any future study, would be to incorporate different ways of gathering and recording data, using more visual and practical methods, rather than relying mainly on memory and reflection.

Working on self-reflection with the participants might also have helped to provide more substantive information in the interviews. It would have been interesting to work with some of the young people to carry out some of the interviews themselves (Cox et al. 2010).

A comparative study of other learning environments would certainly have provided another dimension or different insights. However, by focusing on only one project, greater depth and insight was hopefully achieved.

Learning from the research questions and theoretical findings

Reflecting back on the starting point for my research: to try to understand the processes of learning related to the Project for young people, staff, members of the local community and for myself as a researcher, in the following sections I am going to look at some of the key components of the research questions and the theoretical bases.

Capturing the process of learning

The process of learning is complex; learning can take place anywhere, in any situation. At one end of the continuum is formal learning, and the other end informal learning (Rogers 2004). The outcomes of learning can be planned and intentional while there are also often accidental or unintentional learning outcomes, both positive and negative. It is clear from the research that learning, for many of those involved, was not necessarily recognised by them at the time; it was not always intentional and it was often unexpected. Also, for many of the young people and members of the community involved in the Project, formal learning has not been a positive experience; they talk about the importance of learning the most through experience and practical example. Mark and Jake talk about the problem with other experiences of learning where the paperwork at the start put them off, they want something that gives them real, practical experience from the start.

As demonstrated in my findings formal and informal/ non-formal learning are all important elements of the broad continuum of learning, and it is not helpful to see them as hierarchically differentiated (Rogers 2004). All aspects of learning are important, including intentional and unintentional and play a key role in the holistic experience for those involved.

Where those involved in the process describe what they have gained the most, they talk about the importance of reflection, application and relevance. Reflection is sometimes initiated and stimulated by others, facilitator, youth worker, friend, teacher and sometimes comes directly from the person themselves, but requires them to be engaged in or 'open up' to learning. Also being able to apply the learning, often through practical activities, testing out, making mistakes but being able to see tangible results is important for many of the people at the Project. Seeing relevance and currency of the learning in the 'real world', validating the learning through something external, and putting the learning into use, are important for many of the participants.

All of these point to the need for any learning environment to provide a flexible approach towards young people, who are not always best suited to formal education. Mark talks about some of the differences for him between formal school learning and his experience of informal learning at the Project. Having stated that he had made a conscious decision to engage in learning, wanting to make a change in his life, he equally saw the formal educational system as unresponsive to his particular needs. He identifies two key ways in which the Project was able to offer a more suitable learning environment for his specific case. He describes the feeling of being respected within the Project, which is able to create a positive, non-punitive form of learning. Similarly, he felt that he would respond much better to practical learning, which is rarely catered for within formal education.

This need for a positive environment, especially during the early stages of engagement with young people, is brilliantly summed up by Seb, who seems to have agreed with Mark. For Seb the most important aspects that helped him and he thinks are what other young people need, are support and respect:

'I think people supporting them, support is a big thing, cause a lot of guys don't get it at home, they find it somewhere else and sometimes they get led into trouble, with their mates ...So that's it really it's support and trust and respect and, um just you now people believing in you, you know, yer, it makes you feel good, you know.'

Thus, the findings from the Project seem to suggest that what is needed is a range of positive and challenging opportunities, designed to build practical skills, self esteem, and confidence, and to explore attitudes to work and community.

Identifying changes for self and others

For many people, including myself, identifying in and for themselves the changes that occur through learning can be very difficult. It is sometimes easier to see the changes in other people. One of the principal findings made during the research in relation to this, was that external help was often required to assist individuals in identifying where they had learnt. One way this was achieved was through communicating the learning process to others, and I found that people particularly benefited when they were able to identify specific examples or situations that represented the changes that they or others had been through. Hal talks very clearly about what he had learned through the Project, and was able to give examples, Simon, on the other hand found it hard to give any specific examples for himself and for others. Having someone to help the process of reflection, a mentor, to structure, concentrate on and to identify aspects to develop, are important elements in the learning process. Similarly I have found talking with other people, colleagues and friends has been helpful in clarifying what I have done and what I need to do next. Having supervision sessions has also been very useful for identifying what has gone well and what else needs to be done, having to talk through what I am doing, justifying and clarifying along the way.

What is important is the process, how we look at, reflect and learn from what we do. The constantly shifting and complex nature of individuals, how they see themselves, and how they relate to others, means that it is important to identify the particular learning from each situation, and verbalise to others, so that the learning is recognised and captured. Hal and Jake describe this when they talk to different discussion and support groups about what they have gained through being involved in the Project.

This externalisation, telling the story makes it theirs and helps to make the learning conscious: it gives people a role and place within the communities they are part of. An example of this was when the young people were involved in the official opening and talked to visitors about the Project and how they had contributed, or when Hal and Jake had to meet a visitor at the railway station, take them to the Project, show them round and take part in an interview for a pod cast. They talked to the visitor about the sense of pride about their contribution to the Project and their achievements through being supported through the Project. This process of making the learning conscious, for example through discussion or telling others, is part of the reflective process.

Another important part of the process that was apparent through the research was for people to see a tangible result, for Hal and Jake this was seeing the roof completed, and feeling a sense of pride in what had been achieved. Several of the people involved also talk about how having a common goal or purpose gives them a real sense of working together and sense of achievement, for example, getting the building finished in time for the official opening of the Project.

Learning through and with communities

The Project provides a catalyst for different groups and communities to come together, across interests, age groups, and through providing activities, courses and events. This gives a structure that enables these interactions to happen, where people feel valued and able to contribute in the way they chose. Young people are often involved in the community events, for example at weekend arts event, and open days where they get involved in supporting activities, demonstrating skills, providing refreshments alongside staff and members of the local community. Young people in the Project see themselves sometimes as part of the Project community and sometimes as members of the wider community or as members of other interest groups. Interestingly, it seems that many members of the local community involved, seem to see themselves as supporting the

young people and the Project but not necessarily as part of that specific community. Although in some cases they do consider themselves part of different 'communities of interest', for example the pottery group, the community support group, or the parenting group. Different communities within and around the Project provide opportunities for people from different age ranges to meet, work and learn from each other. All of this points to the importance of understanding the complexities and multi-faceted nature of communities when approaching learning.

Another important finding uncovered by this research, relates to the need for a positive learning environment in order to encourage a young person to engage in the process. Due to low self-esteem, lack of confidence and often limited support networks, young people often need a great deal of encouragement, especially in the early stages of the learning process. Being able to test out ideas, skills, interests, make mistakes and not be ridiculed or judged, is very important for young people as they learn new skills, deal with new situations and develop confidence. Many of the people involved in the Project, found that the emphasis on academic achievement and lack of value placed on practical skills that they had experienced in other learning situations, de-motivated them and disengaged them from learning. Thus, the Project has been able to provide an environment far more suitable for the learning needs of these young people, in a way that many formal educational institutions have been unable to.

Learning across generations

As with communities, intergenerational exchanges and learning are complex. They need to be explored, and the specific needs of all the people involved have to be considered. This involves not imposing solutions on communities but rather involving people in decision making and problem solving, which is complex and time consuming. The exchange between different generations clearly gives some young people different perspectives and helps them think about things in a different way, as well as define

themselves, and their identity, and develop a feeling of self-worth. Intergenerational and multigenerational interactions appear to be most effective when they provide natural opportunities with a common goal or cause. Working together, valuing the contribution of others, and reflecting on and learning from self and others through the process of taking part in an activity with a common purpose, can provide the chance to learn from others from very different perspectives.

The Project has developed an ethos of involving different generations and has slowly built on these initially unexpected encounters, moving to more deliberately planned cross-generation activities. These can provide opportunities to challenge preconceived ideas about others and develop important learning from different perspectives.

Developing identities through learning

As with community, identity for young people as they move towards adulthood, changes and adapts, in relation to different contexts: at work, with friends or family. While the central sense of identity is the same, the way in which we behave, react, and speak may be different. This highly transient form of identity common amongst young people needs to be appreciated whenever they are engaged in the learning process. Helping someone with such a fluid identity, requires teaching and coaching which is equally flexible.

For many young people at the Project, the transition from adolescence to adulthood takes time, a range of experiences, and a great deal of support. The interchange between different generations clearly gave some young people different perspectives and helped them to think about things in a different way.

For Tony, having older role models and support around him, has enabled him to continue down the path he had identified. Similarly, Jake has tried several different pathways, and has used the Project to help him find his way through the complex

choices and decisions to employment.

Establishing identity both personal and vocational can be closely linked and as a result, a difficult experience at work or lack of work experience can have a long lasting impact on a young person's sense of identity and confidence. Being respected and having an opportunity to try out work; discover interests and test out ideas are clearly extremely important for young people developing their identity and sense of self-worth.

In evaluating the findings surrounding young people's transition into adulthood, three key points appear to emerge from my research, which could be very useful if incorporated into future learning environments. Provision for young people should consider:

- greater flexibility in learning provision,
- more emphasis on building support networks outside of the learning environment,
- building on people's strengths, rather than challenging their weaknesses.

So, in identifying these themes, it is important to look in more detail at what has led me to consider these to be key points. The fluid and transient nature of young peoples' identities inevitably require similarly flexible learning provision, with mentors who accept that the transition to adulthood is not as simple and linear as many would like to think. The young people interviewed clearly indicate that they want and respond to, provision that matches their interests and skills; gives them the chance to try out skills and knowledge, and the chance to use them in real opportunities. Often this process is slow and meandering and can involve dipping in and out of learning as and when is suitable for the individual involved. The Project observed this through young people who chose to leave and return to the Project at different times during their journey towards employment and training. They recognise that it is somewhere they can talk things through and learn from experiences that haven't gone well.

Impact on the individuals

This is a brief overview of some of the impacts on individuals in the Project, for some of the young people this has tangibly led to further interviews and events where they have been asked to talk about their experiences. One young person is now working as a very regular volunteer in the Project. Four young people are being supported by the Project and are training with an insulation company and one has been offered a job with the company. One member of staff has gone on to take up training as a social worker and one of the directors is planning on taking up further study doing a masters in research.

Impact on the project

Here I will identify how my research has impacted and fed back into the Project itself. One of the elements of the action research process was about supporting the Project to refocus on its direction and aims. The research has certainly involved everyone, including the directors, staff, community group, young people and several members of the community who interact with the Project. Over the four years of the research I have supported meetings to explore ways forward for the Project, where ideas and views of all were discussed and shared. The research has provided information which has contributed to discussions about how the Project needs to develop. For example the ongoing mentoring support for young people who have left the Project and how the voice of young people can have very clear mechanisms for feeding back into the Project.

The key elements that came through the research, which at the start were sometimes accidental, are being considered and planned more into the learning process, for example opportunities for intergenerational learning. Also, where funding requires a more outcomes focussed approach, with qualifications, the needs of young people to be very directly involved in practical work are maintained and the paperwork introduced later when the young people have engaged and built a relationship with the

project staff.

The Project has taken on board the fact that there is not one community, but many and shifting communities and the larger events can give opportunities for some of these to come together. The importance of providing an environment where people can contribute, feel valued and respected permeates all the groups and the ethos of the whole Project. In this way the research has been useful for identifying some of these key issues to be aware of and to address through the work of the Project.

Implications for policy and action

Here I will identify more specifically how the Project has put some of the recommended changes identified through this research into action and integrated it into the policy and ethos.

The research and my involvement in the Project have meant that it has been able to feed into different aspects of the Project's development. The research process highlighted the importance of young people, staff and the community being involved and contributing to the Project in a very direct way. The Project has now established clear mechanisms for the feedback from the young people's group, staff, and the community group to inform the Project's development. For example, by establishing a support mechanism for the young people who have already gone through the Project. Young people are also now involved in the community group and supporting some of the programmes alongside members of the community.

As part of the Project I have supported the development of resources for young people to explore attitudes to work; built up case studies of the stories of the people involved in the Project to encapsulate some of the key messages for training and demonstrating impact for donor agencies. This has helped highlight the contribution the project is

making towards meeting the needs of young people and involving the community in local action.

My research has also contributed to the development of national policy, feeding into the Centre for Social Justice Reports on Early Intervention and Young people Not in Employment Education or Training (2009), and contributing to a round table discussion at the Local Government Association on solutions for 'NEET' young people. The research has also contributed several case studies in publications including Hidden Talents (2009), and Made to Measure (Devitt and Lowe 2010) as well as the Project and young people being asked to contribute at events. Most recently I have been asked to facilitate a regional debate with young people on the topic of respect. This event will draw in young people from the Project and more widely, to take part in activities to elicit their views, contributing to young people's voices. Moving into a new phase as my research comes to a conclusion; I will be working more in the role of project worker and facilitator and to support new developments.

Glossary

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| PRU | Pupil Referral Unit |
| CIC | Community Interest Company |
| CPN | Community Psychiatric Nurse |
| GCSE | General Certificate of Secondary Education |
| HD | High Dependency |
| LSC | Learning and Skills Council |
| NEET | Not engaged in education, employment or training |
| SfA | Skills Funding Agency |
| YMCA | Young Men's Christian Association |

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