

Education APPG inquiry: How well do schools prepare young people for their future careers?

Submission by the National Literacy Trust.



1. What should our schools be focusing on in order to prepare young people for the future?

1.1 For disadvantaged pupils at risk of low attainment and lacking the social capital to navigate an increasingly complex and competitive employment market, access to high quality career advice, experience of the workplace and the opportunity to develop soft skills is essential. A report from the [Youth Literacy and Employability Commission](#) (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy, 2013) found that young people are deeply concerned about their future employment options and want the skills that will help them succeed. However, they can find formulating career goals difficult and can also find it hard to work out what skills they need for the future. We believe that supporting young people in formulating realistic employment aspirations (particularly in the first years of secondary education) would provide a strong grounding for them to focus on their education, since these aspirations will create a strong appetite for improving literacy skills.

1.2 Careers advice and guidance are essential to prepare young people for the future world of work. This most commonly begins from the age of 14, when young people have chosen their GCSE options and started courses. It can be too late for some children, since they need to have discovered their motivation and purpose to learn before they embark on GCSEs. A recent report from Coms Res and the University and College Union (Young People's perceptions and post-18 education and training options, 2014) found that aspirations change with age, with 64% of 13-year-olds saying that they wanted to go on to higher education when they leave school or college compared to only 53% of 16 year olds. This highlights the need for early experiences of the work place and better impartial information on vocational options.

2. Should schools play a role in developing skills, or should subject knowledge be prioritised?

2.1 It shouldn't be an either/or, but rather schools should equip students with the necessary skills and subject knowledge to both do well at school and be in a strong position to access their chosen career. However, there is an unhelpful juxtaposition between the knowledge and skills required to pass exams and those demanded by employers in the workplace.

2.2 The Youth Literacy and Employability Commission (APPG on Literacy, 2013) found that business and education mean different things by 'literacy'. While united in their understanding of the importance of young people's skills, there is a significant gap between what business and education mean by 'literacy'. Within the education space it is associated with skills needed to pass an exam, including reading and writing. However, business has a much wider definition with a focus on 'softer skills' such as problem solving, teamwork and communication skills. The danger is that young people are falling through this gap, which creates personal tragedies and a national crisis as economic success and social mobility suffer. This highlights the need for a common definition of literacy to ensure that the education system is equipping young people with the basic skills needed to access employment. The fact that only a third (31%) of businesses have links with primary schools compared to 64% having links with secondary schools and 63%

FE colleges suggests that there is also potential for increased business involvement within the primary sector.

2.3 Over-emphasis on achieving grades which are important to schools is preventing students from building up a wide range of skills that employers want. Employer surveys often state that they look at soft skills above qualifications. There is a disconnect between the advice young people are given about work and the labour market they will be presented with. A recent UKCES report (The Death of the Saturday Job, 2015) investigated the long term decline in young people combining work and study, a trend which pre-dated the recession. In 1997, 42% of 16-17 year old students were also working. This figure has declined to 18% in 2014. They found three main reasons for the decline: 'An increasing preference of young people to focus solely on studies, a changing labour market affecting the opportunities for young people to get part-time jobs, and institutional difficulties with the incorporation of work into study timetables.' Employers should play a key role in careers advice, but they should also be involved in broader curriculum development to ensure that key employability skills are embedded throughout the curriculum and not just an 'add on'.

3 Who should be responsible for ensuring that young people develop soft, financial and entrepreneurial skills?

3.1 This should be a shared responsibility between schools and employers to ensure that young people leave school with the necessary skills to access the job market. The Chartered Institute of Professional Development's 2013 report Employers are from Mars, Young People are from Venus still has many relevant findings. Employers find it difficult to assess young people with limited work experience and young people find it difficult to 'market' themselves to employers. Equally, young people lack the knowledge about job opportunities, how to apply for jobs, how to write a good CV and a good application. When young people were asked what they would change about careers guidance, they said: "Don't rely on teachers but get external experts, including employers, into schools to talk about these issues." This supports the idea that there are real limitations in having teachers delivering careers advice without specific training.

3.2 A renewed partnership between business and education is a key ingredient to unlocking the soft, financial and entrepreneurial skills of young people in schools and preparing them for the world of work. This partnership needs to be deeper and more systematic than before. Current changes in the governance and structures of secondary schools, resulting from the Government's academies programme, are creating new opportunities for this. However, demand and supply need to be addressed, as does brokerage. Employers need to recognise that support for a new workforce is crucial for sustainability. Schools need to recognise that links with business will drive up standards and raise pupils' aspirations. The increased focus on evidence-based practice in schools will require these partnerships to be developed on a much stronger evidence base than currently exists. Third sector and local organisations that act as brokers fulfil a vital role. They engage businesses, develop partnerships, train volunteers and support schools. However, in the current economic environment they are often squeezed. The National Literacy Forum, a group of 15 child poverty and literacy charities, launched the [Vision for Literacy Business Pledge 2016](#) on 25 November 2015 with 41 high profile businesses committing to address the literacy challenge. Signatories come from a wide range of sectors with a broad reach into communities

and include KPMG, Pearson, McDonald's, Boots Opticians, Premier League, Costa and Sainsbury's. Action to fulfil the pledge involves engagement with local schools to raise aspirations and increase awareness of the world of work.

- 3.3 Strengthening the influence of business in education will only strengthen education. This means reflecting business needs in assessment and curricula – for instance, restoring speech, language and communication assessment as part of the overall GCSE English grade. Business needs to understand and trust qualifications. There is currently cynicism about what literacy skills are actually guaranteed by an A*-C grade GCSE in English, as well as the value of alternative basic skills qualifications. This is highlighted by a recent survey of 1,395 individuals and organisations for the Education and Training Foundation (*Making maths and English work for all*, 2015) which found that 46% of employers are most concerned with English skills, compared to just 17% being concerned about maths. There also needs to be more done to highlight the relevance and real world application of work done in the classroom. Good work has been done in STEM subjects to bring professionals in to share their knowledge but this still seems to be treated as an added extra and is largely absent from humanities subjects. Students will be more motivated to learn if they understand where it could take them or what it could achieve.
- 3.4 Careers advice and guidance also needs to be forward thinking and ensure that it will enable young people to access employment, rather than just fulfilling the criteria of 16-18-year-olds engaged in some form of learning. According to a recent report from the Fabian Society (*Out of Society*, 2014) many unemployed 18-year-olds were not even taking the courses that would have addressed their major educational needs, especially in literacy and numeracy, whilst some took successive courses at the same level of difficulty and skill, in different vocational areas, but never entered any of those professions.
- 3.5 There needs to be a clearer understanding of the distinction between careers advice and careers education and who should be delivering it. Whilst teachers can provide incredibly valuable support in this area by, for example, sharing their own experiences of choosing a career, they might not always be impartial due to their familiarity with the students and their knowledge of prior attainment and family background. A report prepared for Teach First, *Teachers and Careers: The role of school teachers in delivering career and employability learning* (2015) explores the distinction between careers education and careers guidance in detail and discusses the role of teachers, arguing that teachers' role in careers education needs to be more defined and backed by effective CPD.
- 3.6 The Department for Education's recent *Mapping Careers Provision in Schools and Colleges in England: Research Report* found that careers education was most commonly delivered by internal staff who were not qualified as careers advisors. This highlights the need for greater clarity around what effective careers education actually is, embedded within CPD for teachers. The DfE research also found that websites are a key way of disseminating careers information on learning and work opportunities to students. This is concerning since the National Careers Council's *Taking action: Achieving a culture of change in careers provision* (2014) recommended as a matter of high priority that the National Careers Service improves their website. The statutory duty for schools states 'Online tools can offer imaginative and engaging ways to

encourage young people to think about the opportunities available to them. However schools should note that website access is not sufficient in itself to meet the statutory duty.'

3.7 Whilst the responses to the DfE survey showed that there were a range of interventions happening in schools, it also highlighted significant gaps. For example, 16% of respondents said that students did not receive careers education via lessons/classes that teach them about how to identify and pursue career opportunities. 13% of respondents did not provide workplace visits and 8% did not provide work experience. Provision was also weighted to later in school life, from Year 10 onwards. As stated previously, there is a real need for young people to have early experiences of the work place, ideally from late primary or early secondary education. This will help them formulate their career aspirations. Providing this experience after key decisions have been made, such as which GCSEs to study, risks closing off some career paths and preventing young people from achieving their potential.

3.8 Students enjoy the opportunity to meet working people but there seems to be a disconnect between what employers are able to offer and what schools have the capacity to organise. Where really great projects happen, it is generally because of a brilliant teacher or business representative going above and beyond to make it a success. Without more support and trusted, high quality resources (there is a huge amount available but working out what is good and what is not is a massive task), delivery of good and effective careers advice and careers education will remain patchy.

3.9 There is also an issue around the amount of management time and resource that a schools need to invest to enable employer interactions. Schools can be nervous about investing this time given already stretched capacity. From our experience, we have also found schools nervous about organising careers events since businesses have previously pulled out last minute and business volunteers can struggle to commit. This can have a damaging long term impact. Hopefully, the Careers and Enterprise Company will help mitigate some of these issues.

4 Do education providers have the resources to prepare young people for the workforce?

4.1 Some points included in the question above are relevant here. Teachers are not always best-placed to provide impartial careers advice and are contending with the conflicting pressures around educational attainment.

4.2 The new Careers and Enterprise Company has the potential to provide additional resources in this area by strengthening links between schools/colleges and employers/careers and enterprise bodies, exposing young people to the world of work to inspire them and help them to make more informed decisions about their future. However, there is some risk of it being led by Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), since whilst they are undoubtedly a key player at a local level, their strategies tend to focus on working in the 16-18+ age range. Therefore, they are possibly not best-placed to understand the needs of schools and, in particular, what might work with younger pupils.

4.3 The Careers and Enterprise Company is also likely to face some challenges in building engagement where it is currently lacking. The idea that local coordinators will act as a filter for

schools that currently feel bombarded with options for business engagement and careers activity, and stimulate more where they are lacking, is sound in theory. In practice, careers activities often take students out of lessons and, where schools are struggling to achieve results and under great pressure to do so, this will require a change in mind-set for schools to have the confidence that careers activities are worthwhile. This is likely to take some time to develop and it is unclear what support the local advisors will offer in this area. Furthermore, in areas where SME's are in the majority rather than national employers (who are more likely to have employee volunteering policy) successful engagement with schools often comes down to the presence of a driving force at a senior level who will support staff to dedicate time to volunteering in schools.

5 To help the APPG create a practical set of approaches and recommendations:

What examples are there of schools and colleges preparing young people well for the workforce?

What examples are there of employer-led initiatives that have had an impact?

5.1 The National Literacy Trust's Words for Work programme recruits and trains volunteers from the business community to help improve students' literacy and communication skills. They work in small groups with targeted pupils to develop crucial employability skills and confidence. Pupils who take part give encouraging accounts of how the programme has helped them make the link between school and work, and how it has prepared them for work better than school alone could. One 14-year-old participant commented that 'Words for Work opened my eyes to what you need to do to get a job. I want to be happy in my job when I'm older and I want to work hard at school now.' Another 14-year-old commented, 'Words for Work is the best thing I have done at school. Everything about it was really useful to me. After the project, I was moved up a grade in my speaking and listening, because I felt more confident presenting in front of my teacher.' For a 14-year-old Roma student it was essential in building his confidence in speaking English and formulating career aspirations: 'Sometimes when I try to speak with English people it is difficult because I am foreign and I can't talk like English people. The Words for Work programme made me confident with my communication skills by working with people from the world of work, helping me to understand English life better as well. When I get older I want to be a police man or a paramedic because I like to help people and I like to have responsibilities.'

5.2 Approaches for preparing young people for the world of work are most effective when they consider the specific needs of individual communities complemented by a more general national overview. For example, the challenges of delivering effective careers advice and guidance are very different in cities compared to coastal towns. Furthermore, it is necessary for pupils to gain a clear picture of employment opportunities available in their local area, as well as the training and development opportunities available locally to be able to make decisions about their options after they finish education.

5.3 In Middlesbrough, recent jobs cuts linked to the steel industry have contributed to a groundswell of negativity among young people that their only options for work are to 'get out of Middlesbrough'. We have challenged this narrative in our National Literacy Trust Hub in Middlesbrough by working with employers including Barclays Bank and Thirteen Housing as part of our Words for Work programme. Young people at Macmillan Academy and Trinity Catholic College have been able to meet business people employed locally as part of the programme. The

programme focuses on developing speaking and listening skills and increasing young people's confidence in literacy and employability skills. Students also benefit from informal conversations with adults that help build a picture of local employment opportunities.