

Something to talk about

THE IMPACTS OF PEER CONVERSATION AND RELATIONSHIPS ON THE CHOICES OF YOUNG LEARNERS IN CARLISLE



hello 
future.

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Introduction

How are young people's educational and career choices influenced by their friendship group, and their peers more widely? How much do young people even talk about the future? These are important issues for our understanding of the different factors that work together to determine post-school trajectories, and for the development of widening participation practice.

In the Cumbrian context, these questions are interlaced with questions of geography, mobility and deprivation. Do young people talk about the specific experience of growing up in a geographically isolated area, and how this might impact on their future decisions? Are their peer relationships a 'push' or a 'pull' factor on their decisions about university and other future paths?

Our aim in this project was to explore the impact of peer influence and peer conversation on young people's educational choices, where appropriate with particular reference to the Cumbrian experience. In order to do this, we conducted interviews with young people in Carlisle and Hello Future practitioners. Due to the Covid-19 related school closures, it was not possible to gather data from pupils living in other parts of Cumbria.

The main themes arising from the testimony of young people can be categorised as relating to 1) the behaviour of discussion; 2) internal motivations and 3) attachments to group and/or place. We discuss these in turn. We also consider a fourth dimension raised by our practitioner participants, which is the impact of the age of young learners on peer influence.

Background

Although there is a substantial body of research into the factors that influence a young person's choice to pursue post-compulsory education, there are relatively few studies looking at the influence of friends and other peers on this choice.

While academic achievement and socioeconomic status are clearly primary drivers of decision making, studies have found that friendship and/or peer groups also play a part. These influencing factors interact in ways that differentially affect individual young people in their decision making.

For instance, it has been shown that adolescents from low- or middle-income families have lower aspirations¹ and expectations of entering higher education² compared with their peers from high income families. However, those from low- or middle-income families who have friends from high income families may be more likely to expect to stay in full-time education¹.

Conversely, young people from low-income households whose friends and family show little expectation, support or positive attitudes towards higher education may be less likely to expect to progress into higher education³.

The extent to which peer groups discuss educational and/or career plans is also unclear. Some studies show that young people may not be engaging in discussions with each other about their intentions to go to university or choices of institution or course⁴ to the extent that teachers may expect⁵. Instead, young people are more likely to report talking to – and seeking advice from – parents and other family members⁶. Furthermore, receiving help and guidance from schools or external agencies can lessen the influence of peers^{5,7}.

The evidence on how peer influences affect educational choices is not, therefore, conclusive. There is also an open question as to how these interact with geographical factors, both in terms of rural/urban settings and areas of more or less social mobility. A study of 12 countries found that living in a rural area had a consistently negative effect on educational aspirations, when compared with living in an urban area⁸. However, research from rural Scotland reported that students interviewed had a broadly positive view of higher education, with the majority not seeing geography as a barrier⁹. There is, as yet, little research from England studying whether – and how – peer effects are modulated by living in a geographically isolated area.

These questions are particularly relevant to Cumbria, one of the least densely populated English areas. More specifically, Carlisle was recently ranked 320/324 of English local authority areas in terms of social mobility¹⁰. It is therefore an ideal locale in which to study not only the extent and influence of peer interactions on post-compulsory educational choices, but to investigate possible modulating effects of a specific geographical setting.

Methodology

In order to gather perspectives on how young people's peer relationships and conversations impact on their educational and career choices, we conducted interviews with two groups: the young people themselves, and the Hello Future widening participation practitioners who work with them. These two views – that of the learner and the advisor – allow us to study similarities and differences of perspective in order to give a rich and detailed picture of peer-related influences.

Young learners

We interviewed a total of 12 young learners in two settings in Carlisle: a secondary school and a youth centre. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis and lasted up to 30 minutes. Four participants were from year 9 (ie aged 13-14), seven from Y11 (aged 15-16) and one, aged 18, was studying at a further education college.

Widening participation practitioners

Interviews with Hello Future staff were conducted at the organisation's offices and lasted up to one hour. Of the six practitioners we spoke to, four were originally from Cumbria while two were from other similarly-remote parts of the country, namely East Anglia and the South West.

Impact of Covid-19

Our data collection with young learners took place during the first months of 2020, and we had originally intended to speak to more participants in different secondary schools. However while we were in the process of arranging these visits, the UK's national Covid-19 response began, including a lock-down of workplaces and embargoes on unnecessary travel. It was felt by researchers that schools were likely to be closed for a number of months and that after that they would need time to readjust to changing circumstances; it would therefore be unfair to place another burden on school leaders by asking them to accommodate research activity. We therefore took the decision to curtail data collection for this project as of mid-March 2020.

Findings

Behaviour of discussion

Are young learners talking?

The Hello Future practitioners interviewed for our study held varying opinions as to whether young people discuss the future between themselves or not. Our young learner data reveals that while some are explicitly having such discussions, others are clearly talking without realising they are doing so – for example, reporting not having conversations, but later mentioning friends' future plans. These 'unacknowledged conversations' may not appear in the form of sustained dialogue, but rather may be built up over time as a familiarity from smaller comments, which then feed into understandings of peer group norms. Both groups (practitioners and young learners) agree that conversations increase in frequency around key points such as GCSE options and when making post-16 choices.

"We, like, talk about it a lot at lunch and break and on the way to school, and things. So, like, we try and help each other with that type of thing." Chloe, Y11.

Some things are just too personal

Although these conversations are happening, there is a point beyond which they can become uncomfortable. There may be a variety of reasons for this – some career aspirations are seen as more 'acceptable' (you can discuss being a footballer but not a teacher), discussion of higher education in communities in which this is not the norm can be divisive, and the prospect of low-waged jobs is anathema.

"I feel like some people just want to keep themselves to themselves because other people might have an opinion on what they want to do." Oliver, Y11

"...those conversations are almost threatening, because they're so solitary in the outcome of them." Harry, y11

Even among close friends there can be some constraint, for example an expectation that one has a positive attitude about the future.

“...with my friends, I’m always laughing and, like, it’s a bit strange for them to see me, like, a bit more anxious... it would just be a bit hard for them because we’re always positive with each other.” Chloe, Y11

The role of advice from older peers

The influence of older students from the same community – friends, relatives or student ambassadors – was raised by several young learners. Here we see a dichotomy of experience – young people with older friends/siblings may be told of the fun, social side of HE to the exclusion of learning/career goals, while those who only relate to older peers in formal, WP settings may take away an altogether more serious vision.

“No-one posts that they’re studying, right? ...They can see it as a big game quite easily... And then there’s the other side of it, which are kids who don’t see that online, and those kids only get the university talks. So, then they say, “Oh, university is not for fun, it’s [to be taken seriously].” Harry, Y11

Our recommendations

1. Ensure practitioners are aware that even if young people don’t recognise that they are speaking about future choices, there is clearly a fair amount of ‘unacknowledged conversation’ going on, which is then informing young learners’ ideas of peer group norms.
2. Conversation peaks around key transition points; focusing on these and trying to maintain discussion may have the potential to bring more options under consideration.
3. Certain future-related subjects are seen as ‘too personal’ to discuss openly. Is it possible to allow private space for discussion? It is also worth considering whether it is wise to raise certain potentially embarrassing or divisive subjects in the group context.
4. Consider the role of the student ambassador in light of the information that older siblings and friends are reported to be conveying. If ambassadors are strongly focused on education/career issues while informal contacts focus on the social side of HE, this risks creating a dichotomy of expectations among those who are and aren’t able to gather information from informal sources.

Internal motivations

The role of ‘passion’

Pupils that had a ‘passion’ for something – for example music or mechanics – felt that this strongly mediated peer discussion, either because the interest was shared with school friends or because they

had sought out groups in out-of-school settings with whom they could discuss the future. This group also tended to feel that ‘negative’ comments by peers would be less likely to sway them away from their chosen path.

“...if a person, say, wants to go to university to be a lawyer, yet they don’t have a massive passion for law, then I think that [friends] could influence it a bit more...” Harry, Y11

Some practitioners felt nurturing passions was an important aspect of their role and that the geography of Cumbria militated against this.

However there is a question as to how the presence of individuals with ‘passions’ impacts on others in the group. If they are allowed to dominate conversation and peer-led activity in WP settings, this may suppress the expression of the more moderate interests that most people base their future plans on. If passion is presented as a key component of being prepared for the future, this may cause those lacking such strong interests to become self-critical or disaffected. We suggest that this phenomenon merits further study.

Disconnect in perceptions of self/friends

It was notable that *all* our young participants had future plans, some fairly general – eg studying music at university – and some highly detailed, for example specific jobs and travel plans. However many of these pupils stated that at least some of their friends/peers had no plans for the future, sometimes in slightly derogatory tones.

[Do you think your experience and ideas are the same as other people in Carlisle?] “Probably not, no... Because I’ve got two main plans and one back-up plan.” Grace, Y9

There is an interesting disconnect here between the idea of oneself, who has plans for the future, and others, many of whom do not. We would question whether this is in fact the case, or whether in actual fact most young people do have plans but maybe feel constrained from discussing them, as in 1(c).

Our recommendations

5. ‘Passions’ may encourage more positive peer conversation and make young learners less likely to be swayed by others. Can more be done to provide outlets for these within the school setting, or to create cross-community opportunities to bring young people together?
6. However care should be taken that passions are not allowed to dominate expression of the milder interests that are the basis for most individuals’ educational and career choices. We suggest that further study into the effects of passionate individuals’ presence on other group members is warranted.

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7. Ensure practitioners are aware that most young people do have a plan for their future, contrary to the beliefs of their peers. However they may not feel able to express these plans. This insight should provide a starting mindset for activity development.

Attachment to group and/or place

Staying and leaving

Some of our young participants were clear that they wanted to leave Carlisle, while others were unsure; only one was definite that they wanted to stay. Some were unsure about what 'leaving' might look like but were negative about 'staying'. Some participants assumed that their friends would hold their view, while others had discussed it. Reasons for leaving included that Carlisle was 'boring' and there was 'nothing here', and also for some a desire to seek a place where non-conformity, eg in dress or sexuality, would be more welcome.

"I haven't talked about it that much. But I reckon if you asked a few people, yes, it'll be common that they want to move somewhere." Daniel, Y11

"...there are just more diverse groups down in Manchester than there are up here... more people to actually relate to and actually find that they have the same mindset as yourself." Samuel, Y11

Many participants had clearly thought about this question, and practitioners noted that they actively stimulated such discussions. However they reported that these may have uncomfortable outcomes, such as arguments; some young learners also saw such discussions as potentially divisive.

Clustering/pocketing

Both groups of participants reported a 'clustering' effect of friends around particular choices at key points; for example some young learners reported selecting the same courses as their friends during the options process, and choosing the same post-16 destinations. Practitioners had also seen this at post-18, both in the young people they worked with and their own lived experience.

"One of my friends... she's got a group of friends and they're all very close-knit. Because of this, they're going to the same place for A level..." Harry, Y11

Practitioners also commented that decisions around extra-curricular activities such as those offered by Hello Future were made in a 'cluster'. Practitioners made the suggestion that this 'pocketing' effect was more likely to occur in geographically-isolated areas.

Reactions to views of friends

Young participants were clear that, should their friends ask them not to leave the local area or seek to overtly influence their decision, they would not be swayed by this although it might be hard. Some thought that being strongly motivated in your own decisions, for example by ‘passion’, would help to withstand such appeals. However this view may seem in tension with the clustering effects mentioned in the previous point; there is a distinction between explicit and implicit influence. Young people would be resistant to being ‘told what to do’ by friends, but in many circumstances may find it easier to ‘go with the flow’ of peer norms.

“I think it would be friends. I think some of them would be staying and then they’d be like, “Oh no, stay with us,” but I want to leave. I don’t think they would be barriers for me.”
William, Y9

Our recommendations

8. Consider whether leading discussions focused on ‘leaving’ Cumbria may be divisive and uncomfortable for young people. Is it possible to refocus discussions to avoid this becoming an extra layer of pressure for young people who are already faced with a series of daunting decisions?
9. The question of how ideas of ‘staying’ and ‘leaving’ are presented to young people in geographically remote areas, and how this contrasts with the experience of learners in different areas of the country, is one that merits further study.
10. Be mindful that the ‘clustering’ tendency in extra-curricular choices can lead to knock-on effects for young people’s choices down the line, and that this type of ‘implicit’ influence is likely to be much more impactful on young learners than explicit advice or demands from peers. Can we structure activities to make it easier for young people to attend alone?

Age-related effects

Practitioners reported a change in attitude towards discussion of the future between years 9 and 11. Because of the composition of our young learner cohort (four from Y9, seven from Y11 and one in FE), it is difficult for us to take a definitive position on whether this view is ‘correct’. However it is interesting to consider the practitioner perspective.

Practitioners state that pupils in Y9 may be inclined not to see the point of discussing the future, as it is too far away, while those in Y11 are at the point of being forced to make a decision and so see the necessity to engage to an extent.

“...we don’t know enough about it, and it’s not, like, a big thing. There are better things to talk about.” William, Y9.

“I feel like the conversations with my friends started as a laugh, early on, like year 8-ish... but as soon as we’ve got through and we’re into year 11 and we’ve got on to think about stuff, it’s more it became an actual idea of what we want to do.” Oliver, Y11.

However on the converse, Y9 pupils are freer and less constrained in such discussions while Y11 are less open, possibly because they feel more pressure to conform and possibly because they are daunted by the reality of their situation – ‘real’ things are liable to feel too personal and these can include realistic ambitions and issues of money.

Practitioners also report that Y11 pupils are more inclined to the idea of ‘leaving’ Cumbria, which they ascribe to a lack of opportunities in the local area being made more evident by increased knowledge and life experience.

Our recommendations

11. Y11 are reported to find class-based conversation more difficult than in Y9. Is there scope to use different methods for older pupils – maybe more small groups and less general conversation?
12. As Y9 are more open to discussion of the future, it may be a good idea to maintain regular discussion sessions beginning at this age so that the habit of discourse and openness is developed.

Conclusions

Our interviews with young people suggest that they are discussing the future with friends – even if they are sometimes unaware of it – but that some topics are too personal or sensitive to be approached. All our participants had plans, but felt that some peers did not; this disconnect may be due to constraints about what can and cannot be expressed. Practitioners also reported that older (year 11) students found group/classroom discussions difficult; younger (year 9) pupils were more open to discussion about the future but less generally interested, probably because of a lack of immediacy.

Although pupils resisted the suggestion that they would allow their friends to explicitly influence their future choices, it was clear that some were swayed at key decision points such as options choices. These implicit influences had the potential to impact on post-compulsory trajectories. Meanwhile discussions about ‘staying’ or ‘leaving’ – a feature of WP work which may be specific to more isolated areas – had the potential to be uncomfortable and divisive.

These findings have the potential to give widening participation practitioners an insight into the extent of peer influence on young people’s decision-making, and the difficulties associated with discussions about the future, particularly in the specific geographical context of Carlisle. We hope that our recommendations will be useful in future priority setting and activity planning.

Notes

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