

## Without targeted initiatives, children face a possible future of long-term unemployment and all its accompanying ills

**Tim Linehan** discusses the implications of long-term youth unemployment for society and argues that various interventions, such as literacy programmes, can make a positive difference.



We know now from The Chancellor that austerity is here to stay, at least until 2018. We also know that around 22 per cent of young people in the UK are unemployed. Statistics come and go and we become inured to the stories they tell. But there are some important policy questions to be asked about how we prevent our young people's lives becoming devastated by austerity.

Of the 22 per cent, around 264,000 young people are long-term unemployed. They are most likely to be young men, according to the Work Foundation. The number has grown rapidly from 75,000 in 2001, to 100,000 in 2008 to its current figure and as the Work Foundation's report, *Short-term crisis, long-term problem*, says: "The longer a young person is removed from employment, education or training, the worse the long-term consequences for the individual and the economy."

Let's be clear what unemployment means. Long-term unemployment (particularly for men) pretty much equates to poverty plus depression. It means health problems, a shorter life and a higher risk of involvement in crime.

At my children's primary school in Hackney, a new programme has been developed to help children's literacy. Many of these children will do well but some will struggle. As in other areas of the UK poverty, family deprivation, parents who had a poor experience of school will all take their toll. Around 6-7% of children in the UK are not reaching national curriculum stage three at the age of 11. This figure has remained constant for the last fifteen years. These are the children who are most likely to become associated with crime, poor health – especially mental health – and parenting difficulties.

However, there are programmes that can help. *The Reading Recovery Programme* can transform the expectations of the worst off children and help them gain the literacy skills that could make the difference between getting a job and a long-term unemployment. In a country with one of the worst records in the developed world of social mobility that's important.

According to an evaluation of the programme carried out by the Institute of Education, 80 per cent of children who complete the reading recovery programme make four to five times the average progress. What's more, their learning is sustained, continuing afterwards at the same rate as their peers.

Literacy is a serious issue particularly for boys. With heavy industry vanishing and the rise of the service economy, social and emotional skills are becoming all the more important, as the IPPR pointed out in its report *Freedom's Orphans*. Literacy isn't exactly a social and emotional skill, but communication is a key word in the social and emotional lexicon and without good literacy, the prospect of future employment is all the more bleak. The question is, then, where do literacy problems start?

According to findings in the Boys' Reading Commission which was published earlier this year by the All Party Parliamentary Literacy Group and the National Literacy Trust, 76% of schools said that boys didn't do as well in reading as girls. The gap between boys and girls starts before school and, shockingly, there is a gap of 11 percentage points between boys' and girls' reading by the age of five. The Commission gave three reasons for this underachievement: the home environment, where girls are more likely to be bought books and to be taken to the library, the school environment where teachers may have a limited knowledge of reading texts for boys, and gender identities which means that boys do not value learning

as much as girls.

There may be a fourth, as well. If the gap in reading skills between girls and boys is so high when they start school, and if parents are children's primary educators, why aren't early years settings doing more to work in partnership with parents? The rhetoric is there, the promise is there, but in most early years settings the parents leave their children at the door and simply don't understand their role in the partnership. Partnership would a better understanding from the underqualified staff in the early years sector of what a relationship with parents look like. For example, how many fathers are involved in early years settings? And if the problem is one of role models, as the Boys' Reading Commission suggests, how many early years settings have the contact details of fathers as well as mothers, let alone a programme to engage them with reading with their children? We know from our knowledge of psychology that young boys in particular seek the approval of their fathers. We know that children's reading is more sensitive to parental influences than any other school subject. We also know that there are precious few male teachers in primary schools to challenge relatively low opinions that boys have of learning.

Moreover, there are some additional worrying implications for gender imbalance in primary schools that go beyond modelling; research from the LSE shows that teachers tend to award higher marks to children of their own gender. Overwhelmingly, most teachers in primary schools are women. And, shockingly, when the United Kingdom Literacy Association asked 1,200 primary school teachers to name six writers of fiction for children, *only one teacher* named a significant writer for boys.

It's always easier to point to failings than success. But the point is simple. Role models are important. Boys need to see a connection between masculinity and literacy, and at the moment this is not happening.

Literacy is not the answer to long-term youth unemployment, but without a doubt the poor standard of literacy is one reason why boys and young men are disproportionately affected. We need to go beyond simplistic discussions about ratios and understand that a gender bias in early schools is contributing to the long-term prospects of boys in the employment market, and to their long-term health and wellbeing. The early years sector needs to rethink the way it presents itself to parents – currently many parents see an institution with professionals who will take responsibility for early years education. They simply don't understand the meaning of partnership. Nor do staff. The simple message in early years of partnership is neither understood nor put into practice in the way it should be.

Twice a week, at my children's primary school, I join a group of volunteer parents taking small groups of children for a half an hour reading class. The school's ambition is to give all children the chance for half an hour intensive literacy every day. Many of the children are bright and destined to do well. But I find myself wondering who are the 6-7 per cent who will struggle. Some of the reforms needed to help this group require a cultural rather than a financial investment. Promoting genuine partnership with parents in the early years, working with fathers, and understanding the roles of men in promoting learning are not costly. The Reading Recovery Programme costs around £3,000 per child. Yet without these initiatives children face a possible future of long-term unemployment and all its accompanying ills and boys in particular will become, in the words of The UNICEF Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, the victims of 'poor social policies and programmes, unfair economic arrangements and bad politics'.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

## **About the author**

**Tim Linehan** is Editor of *Every Child Journal*, a magazine promoting interagency working with a particular interest in early intervention. He is a campaigner on social justice issues who has run campaigns on child prostitution, young runaways, and employment opportunities for ex-offenders among other things. Previously he was Director of Campaigns at The Children's Society. He now works as a consultant.

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