

The root cause of social exclusion is poverty. The ways in which the origins of poverty are explained depends considerably on political ideas. It is worth stopping to think about this for a while because assumptions about the root causes of poverty – and social exclusion – influence how the issues are discussed, what should be done about them, and in what ways action might be taken.

This is the tenth in a series of briefing sheets which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues

Also available:

1. A history of the development of NIACE
2. What motivates people to learn
3. Student non-completion (drop out)
4. Who learns - key facts
5. Family learning
6. Lifelong learning - opportunities and initiatives
7. New Deal
8. Learning centres
9. Young adult learners, disaffection and social exclusion
10. Social exclusion
11. Emancipatory learning
12. Fees charged to part-time adult students 1998-99

Suggestions for future issues to be covered are welcome.

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Poverty and Social Exclusion

At various times in the last thirty years the condition now called 'social exclusion' has been called 'disadvantage', 'deprivation', and, during the Thatcher years, the emergence of an 'underclass'. In this sense, social exclusion is not new. It relates to economic and social class systems in Britain, based on age-old inequalities in the ownership and distribution of wealth, jobs, resources and power. Despite numerous social changes, conditions of structural inequality have not disappeared. In fact, the gap between the richest and poorest sections of the population has increased dramatically in recent years. Between 1979 and 1995 the net incomes of the richest ten percent of the population grew by 68%, while those of the bottom tenth fell by 8% (Social Exclusion Unit 1998)

At the same time, the geography of poverty has intensified with the poorest becoming more concentrated in small areas of acute need. In the 1980s the sharpest distinctions tended to be between cities and regions - in particular between old manufacturing centres in the North and prosperous new economies in the South East. Whilst these differences still remain, some of the greatest distinctions now exist *within* regions and *within* cities. Some of the most deprived and run down neighbourhoods lie only a mile or two away from prosperous neighbourhoods and city centres.

Increased material poverty, leading to social exclusion, is only part of the extent of poverty, however. Social exclusion is also affected by massive inequalities in cultural recognition and social diversity, as well as huge inequalities relating to and reinforced by unequal access to information and education. People who are currently referred to as 'socially excluded' are not only financially poor, they are also from social groups whose ethnicity, culture and identity carry the least amount of recognition, influence and power in society. They are likely to be the least well educated and the most disenfranchised when it comes to active participation in civil and democratic society.

Thirty, Thirty, Forty Society

In *The State We're In* Will Hutton (1995) describes 'the thirty, thirty, forty society'. The first 30% he calls the **disadvantaged**. This group includes young and long term unemployed men who are out of work, including many who do not come within official definitions and are not counted as officially unemployed. It also includes unemployed women. Altogether some 28% of the adult population are either unemployed or economically inactive. When those who are engaged in government schemes and those who only have bits and pieces of irregular part time work are added, the proportion of people living on the edge is almost 30% of the population.

The second 30% he calls the **marginalised and insecure**. This group has work but their jobs tend to be insecure, poorly protected and carrying few benefits. It includes the growing army of part time, small scale self employed, and casual workers. It also includes those in full time work but whose terms and conditions have been weakened by the decline of trade unions, the increase in fixed term contracts and by economic restructuring. It includes the million or more full time workers who earn less than half the national average wage.. This group includes many women whose long march into employment has accelerated in recent years. However, the vast majority of women workers are employed in poorly paid, part time and casual jobs (McGivney 2000). Twenty five years after Equal Pay legislation was introduced, women on average still earn only 70% of men's weekly and annual wages.

The last 40% he calls the **privileged** – those whose market power has steadily increased since 1979. These are full time and self-employed people, many of whom have benefited from the increase in share ownership and profit sharing schemes since the 1980s. Not all of this group are rich, although the top 10% are getting richer. Of the rest, 35% of full time workers still earn less than 80% of the average wage. Nevertheless the security of their income means they are *relatively* advantaged compared to those in the other two groups (Scales and Pahl 1999).

According to Will Hutton, the fact that more than half the people in Britain - who are eligible to work - are living on either poverty incomes or in conditions of permanent stress and insecurity, has had dreadful effects on the wider society. It is

harder and harder for women and men in these circumstances to hold their marriages together, parenting becomes more stressful, long hours and anti social working patterns - in order to earn a living wage - are common. Those who cannot find work are increasingly demoralised. Their concentration in communities that have become pauperised leads to hopelessness. In addition, legislative attacks on democratic involvement in trade unions, local government, and the right to free association - to picket and demonstrate - have all contributed to the feeling that 'nothing can be done' by ordinary people to effect political changes. It is clear that while some people have benefited enormously from improved living standards, the economic changes promoted by Free Market Economics and Centre Right social policies have been imposed at great social cost. These are some of the developments which have intensified the problems of social exclusion and which now need to be addressed (Thompson 2000a).

Risk Society?

Ideas developed by Ulrich Beck (1997) and Anthony Giddens (1994) point to the emergence of 'risk society' which is characterised by

- Accelerating changes in many dimensions of life, from work to the family, driven in part by powerful and often remote global forces.
- Increasing diversity and fragmentation of experiences and institutions.
- Changing identities, loyalties and aspirations.
- Much greater emphasis on consumption and its pleasures, including some democratisation of inventiveness and creativity.
- More focus upon choice, lifestyle and individuality.
- The increasing variety and pluralism of popular culture.
- The pervasive and growing role of information and knowledge in many arenas of economic, social, political and working life.
- The growing importance of communications and information technology in many aspects of life.
- The development of different definitions of political participation, including popular movements, self help groups, constitutional reform and active citizenship.
- The emergence of new agendas in politics, concerned with issues as diverse as race and gender equality, disability rights, the environment, food and transport.

If Beck and Giddens' analysis is correct, there are also a number of consequences, not least of which are

- The intensification of social divisions, experienced as increased inequalities of income, employment, housing, health and education, including access to information

And

- The growth of social exclusion, feelings of despair and a widespread sense of hopelessness, resulting from the impact of multiple deprivations.

The Social Exclusion Unit

Tackling social exclusion is said to be one of the present Government's highest priorities. In order to do so a Social Exclusion Unit has been set up to focus on some of the most difficult problems. Its aims are to increase understanding about the problems which create social exclusion and to promote co-operation between government departments in tackling them more effectively. The emphasis is increasingly intended to be on policies aiming to prevent social exclusion rather than merely dealing with its consequences. In its first phase of operation the Social Exclusion Unit has been concentrating on truancy and school exclusions, rough sleeping, teenage pregnancy rates, new opportunities in education, employment and training for 16–18 year olds and neighbourhood renewal.

According to the Social Exclusion Unit, 'social exclusion' is what happens when 'individuals or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime environments, bad health and family breakdown'. In its analysis of worst estates, the Unit's report *Bringing Britain Back Together: A National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal* (1998) makes clear that the problems experienced in terrible neighbourhoods have come about for a number of reasons. These include the decline in traditional forms of employment and the rise in unemployment, bad housing allocation policies, and the tendency to 'parachute in' solutions from outside, rather than engage local communities. The concentration of poor people living in neighbourhoods where the odds are stacked against them, leads to increased levels of crime, social division and low achievement.

Education Matters

It is clear that education – on its own – cannot change societies in which there are economic and class systems which encourage huge differences in wealth and access to resources, including access to real jobs, information and democratic participation. Neither is it surprising that those who live in pauperised neighbourhoods are amongst the least well educated, the least well informed and are the least susceptible to educational overtures from earnest professionals – however well intentioned. But education can play a part in assisting people in their various struggles against poverty and unemployment, discrimination, exploitation, inequalities and social injustices. Education can also help individuals and groups to create the kinds of 'really useful knowledge' (See NIACE briefing notes entitled *Emancipatory Learning*) that increases awareness, that develops new skills and that encourages more informed and more effective participation in civil society (Thompson 1997, 2000a).

It is likely that education will be most useful when it is related to the ordinary details of everyday life and is not seen as something which 'other people' do or which is irrelevant. It might be most engaging when it captures the imagination and involves the satisfaction of unfulfilled desires and secret passions. The challenge facing adult educators and trainers is to establish a committed dialogue with groups in poor communities, to develop the kinds of educational supports that make sense to them, and which can begin to make a difference to their lives (Thompson 2000b). These initiatives will be most effective when they take place in locally based settings and in contexts that are easily accessible and unpretentious. The extent to which more formal provision might then be offered will depend upon the quality and relevance of earlier informal and non formal learning experiences. It will also depend upon the willingness of Government, funding bodies, education providers and voluntary organisations to rethink the cost, the culture and the context of what they have to offer non traditional learners (McGivney 1999).

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to suggest that on an individual basis education can help people to change their lives. But changing the lives of whole communities of people, living in the worst possible circumstances, is something which requires a different kind of educational imagination and a

different quality of commitment. The biggest contribution education can make to overcoming social exclusion is to find ways of relating learning to collective engagement in common struggles and common concerns in sustainable ways, that help repair damaged solidarities, and collaborate in building new ones (Thompson, Shaw and Bane 2000).

Jane Thompson

References and Further Reading

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NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient resources.
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