

The Ladder Project – ‘Five years to prove I wasn’t stupid’

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Introduction

The Ladder was an action research project run by the People and Work Unit between 1997-2002. It involved 11 young adults in work in their own communities, developing a holistic model of personal support for 16-25 year olds. The Unit did not start out with any preconceptions about how to work with poorly qualified young people. The aim was to discover a way of supporting them which could make a real difference to their lives, involving unqualified young people as the core resource and project leaders. The aims of the Ladder were: to give young people the opportunity to become part of the regeneration of their community by qualifying as professionals who could compete for the jobs being created; to provide an holistic support network led by local young people that could respond to individual needs; to ensure that young people could access, and sustain involvement in, education, training and employment opportunities; and to promote the positive role models that many young people lack.

The Ladder model

The Ladder had two broad objectives. These were:

To assist young people to access and sustain education, training, employment or self-employment and so become part of the regeneration of their community. The work was targeted at 16-25 year olds not in education, training or employment. Much of the work was outreach work, aimed at engaging those young people that for whatever reason had not been reached by more mainstream methods. The Ladder workers worked with these disaffected young adults in an intense one to one way, including 'handholding' the client for as long as it took them to acquire the confidence and skills to rejoin society fully and act independently. The work was tailor made to each individual to meet their whole range of social and economic needs. They worked hand-in-hand with the many agencies who offer services these young adults may require, including housing associations, the Employment Service, ELWa (Education and Learning Wales), local employers and colleges, in an attempt to find a complete solution to the young adult's problems.

To produce local, well qualified professionals in the community regeneration field, with good quality hands-on experience of working in the voluntary sector. Many community regeneration organisations have to look outside of their local area to recruit professional staff. The Ladder workers were drawn from the local community. When recruited, they were unemployed or underemployed local people within the same age bracket as the target group. They did not have any qualifications nor any experience in this area of work, but they displayed potential leadership skills, an enthusiasm for working with disaffected young adults and a commitment to pursuing a qualification. One of the key factors for the success of this project is that the Ladder workers were drawn from and had come through the same experiences as the target group.

The Ladder workers were drawn from unemployed, unqualified young adults in the local community. They carried out outreach work with disadvantaged young adults, while at the same time being trained up over a five year 'apprenticeship' at the end of which the aim was for them to have reached diploma level and have gained enough experience to be able to take on further employment in community regeneration work.

Target group

The needs of the target group were clearly demonstrated through the original research mapping the training & education experiences of a group of young people in the South Wales Valleys, which ran alongside the Ladder project, extracts of which are included below (Lloyd-

Jones 2002):

The 54 young people who contributed to the research were recruited via the Ladder project or its partner organisations. The criteria for selecting them was that they were aged between 15 and 25 when first recruited, that they were unemployed and not in full-time education or training (10 were on an alternative curriculum project) and that they had low level or no qualifications. They volunteered to take part in the research because it was explained that their stories and experiences could make a contribution to helping people plan future services for young people like them.

23 were already parents and had, between them, 40 children. Only 8 were living with their child/children's other parent.

The young people had a strong sense of belonging to the place they had grown up and few would consider moving more than a couple of miles away. This had implications for their expectations, work opportunities and lifestyle.

Decision-making was hard – young people talked about preferring “things to just happen” rather than having to decide what to do. Long-term decisions – like signing up to a course that takes a year – were frightening.

“There was this sort of fear of what would happen if I did go on to university, I mean what would happen in that time, in 2 years time. Am I going to be going away for 3 years? Getting pregnant sort of stopped that problem then. The problem didn't exist anymore.”

School

21 left school with no qualification having sat no exams at the end of Year 11. Only 5 of the young people achieved 5 or more GCSEs.

None of the sample had completed a year of post-compulsory education when first interviewed.

17 had missed a significant period of their schooling through accidents, ill-health or family problems.

Leaving school

Over a third had no idea in school what they wanted do when they left.

Careers guidance was seen, at best, as information on local courses and irrelevant to those who were not already decided on what to do.

44 of the 54 had been on a Youth Training or further education programme but only 16 had achieved any form of credit or recognition of this.

Only 4 of the 23 who had done a Youth Training programme had gained even an NVQ Level 1.

10 of the 16 who had gained a post-school qualification or credit had done it through a community project.

Work

Only 3 of the 54 had found sustainable employment by the end of the study.

None would have been included in the long-term unemployment figures – the females out of work were mostly mothers and the males were on either on sickness benefit or on six monthly New Deal programmes.

22 of the 33 aged 20 years or over had either family commitments or health problems (including drug dependency) which were major barriers to work.

Information on 126 jobs was collected; on average males kept a job for 16.5 weeks and females for 38 weeks. By the end of the study 12 young people had never had a job and 6 had never had one last more than 8 weeks.

50 jobs ended when young people were laid off and the same number ended because they walked out.

10 jobs ended when young people were sacked.

4 jobs ended when the employer folded the business.

The future

With 1 exception, all the young people, including the 17 mothers, saw their future in work.

26 had no idea what job they wanted to do.

28 had particular dreams or aims. Over half of these would have to train if these ambitions were to be achieved.

To gain the skills they needed the young people would need significant support, guidance and encouragement and high quality training provision.

Lloyd-Jones S (2002) pp 39-41

Methodology

The People and Work Unit's approach to the Ladder project was one of genuine partnership and involvement; of risk taking and allowing people the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them; of trust and support and encouragement to progress as far as possible along your chosen path; an understanding that personal and professional development takes years not months and needs to be invested in with funding and other resources; and of a belief that people can succeed given the right environment and support.

Genuine partnership: the Ladder workers were involved in all major decisions taken about them, their work and their role within the Unit, from the very start. This entailed supporting them to decide what course they wanted to follow at University and where and how they wanted to study, letting them decide the best and most appropriate ways of engaging with the young people in their community, holding monthly team meetings, attended by managers from the People and Work Unit and other partners as well as the Ladder workers, which the Ladder workers chaired and ran, consulting them and asking their advice on how to develop the Ladder model for the future and taking them to conferences to present workshops on the Ladder project. Many of the Ladder workers remarked that this was the first time they'd been asked what they thought about anything and genuinely appreciated and saw the benefits to them and to us of being so actively involved.

Risk taking: the Ladder concept was a risk in itself. "*People might look at the idea of putting untrained young people to work with young people as a risky thing.*" (Ladder worker quoted in the Times Educational Supplement 2001). The People and Work Unit works through action research to find new and innovative ways of supporting disadvantaged young people. The Unit asked the young people we worked with to take a leap of faith by coming on board. We needed to show that the Unit had faith in them by being willing to take risks and allowing them to do the same. "*[The Ladder's] given people the freedom to make mistakes. We don't have statistics, we don't have to meet any criteria, everybody's allowed their space.*" Ladder worker (Lloyd Jones 2002 p 112).

Support to progress: the Ladder workers were encouraged, pushed and cajoled into sticking with, making the most of and completing their chosen courses. "*I'm really chuffed. I'd never imagined I would be doing a degree. It was really hard work but now I can see the benefits – I've really enjoyed the whole process.*" "*Looking back before the project, university was never an option for me. But now I've definitely got the bug to learn.*" Ladder workers (Lloyd-Jones 2002 p116-7). Although all the Ladder workers now really appreciate the learning they did, and claim to have enjoyed it all, there were many times with each when they needed encouragement or persuasion or even an occasional shove to make sure they stuck with it. Some of them needed to try a couple of different courses before they found the right one.

Long term working: the Ladder was a long term commitment from the Unit to the workers and from the workers to their clients. "*The Ladder does not have the boundaries of many programmes and so, although it will direct clients to specialised help, it has the capacity and*

capability to stay with the client through their own process of change.” (Hunte & Foxley independent evaluation report 2000).

“It’s been very rewarding. We’ve had five years to work with people, and over the years some people have let us down, but they seem to come back whether it’s a month later or a year later. So we’ve given them the chance to do that, and bounce off us and try things, and make their own mistakes. But we’re always there in the same building or doing the same thing, and we never turn them away when they do let us down or make mistakes.” Ladder worker (Lloyd-Jones 2002 p 111). To work in this way is expensive and time consuming – but it also achieves real results that can change a person forever and have a knock on effect on their peer group.

A belief in success: one of the clients the Ladder worked with throughout the whole of the five years spent much of that time teetering on the edge of going to prison, unemployed, wasting his time but dipping in and out of the Ladder project. The Ladder workers kept in touch with him, kept going back to him and drawing him back in. Eventually, after many small steps, including some basic self confidence things such as helping him get his teeth fixed, something clicked, and last year he became a Millennium volunteer, went to the Queens Garden Party at Buckingham Palace and is now working as a trainee youth worker.

Results

Over five years the project worked with 1,361 of the hardest to reach young adults. Of these 672 enrolled on formal training or further education courses and many more on short, informal or unaccredited learning programmes and 716 young people took part in volunteering and/or community activities as diverse as football tournaments, Millennium Volunteers and outdoor pursuits. Young people have been helped to find work, to get training and qualifications, to sort out personal and family problems and to build their confidence and motivation

All nine of the Ladder apprentices and one of the short term trainees completed the YMCA George Williams College Foundation course in Informal Education. Two progressed onto the University of Newport’s Diploma in Youth and Community Work. One completed a Diploma in Welfare Studies. One did a Certificate in Social Work with the Open University. One studied for a Certificate in Social Sciences course with the OU. Two completed a certificate level course in Youth and Community Work, one of which went on to complete a degree. Eight of the 9 apprentices are still working in community regeneration as professionals, 7 of them in their local communities. The last has stopped work to have a baby.

The reasons for the success of the Ladder have been identified as the approach the Unit took to choosing, managing and supporting the Ladder apprentices and in turn the approach that the Ladder workers were enabled to take with their clients.

Janine left school at 16 without a piece of paper to her name. Now aged 21, she is a qualified part-time youth worker... She has done this through the Ladder project, an experimental initiative aimed at helping disadvantaged youngsters in the South Wales Valleys into education, training and jobs. Its workers come from the same communities as the youngsters they support. They spend part of the week on their own training and the rest working with young people.

Times Educational Supplement (2001).

As well as their own development, Ladder workers offered a particular approach to work with young people which has informed the role of the team leaders in Life Support and other projects.

“Joe (the Ladder youth worker) supported me from the beginning, phoning my house every morning saying, ‘Come on – there’s no point lying in bed all day. Let’s get out and do something.’ She helped me out with job search, got me involved with projects she had running, and going to an outdoor pursuit centre. She got us doing things – it was really good. Then I started going on outreach to see what youth work was all about. It just went from there.”

Client supported by the Ladder project

“For me this has been something I never would have dreamt of having the opportunity to do. To be given the freedom and support to grow the way all the workers have, and the training. If there’s something relevant to our work and we wanted to do it, we’ve always asked and it’s been agreed. It’s been funded. Short courses, one day conferences, and some of them are quite expensive with travelling and time. The opportunities for the workers have been unbelievable. And the same for the young people really. We’ve given them as much as we can in the way of opportunities and support. I think it covers everything, and the holistic approach of working with everybody’s individual needs – everybody’s different. Every single parent has a different situation and different reason why they’re a single parent. Every young person has a different reason why they’re disadvantaged. We focus on the individual.”

Joe, aged 30, has two children aged ten and one. The flexibility of the Ladder has allowed her to try out work placements while still with the project. “I still want to work with young people in some form, so my qualification will be used. I’m not sure if it’s social work I want to go into, but that’s part of the Ladder project again. It’s allowed me to do that, to experience it and make decisions.”

Former Ladder worker

(Lloyd-Jones 2002 pp 109-124)

References

Lloyd-Jones S (2002), *D’you Know What I Mean?* The Ladder Project – a study in learning to meet young people’s needs. Abergavenny. People and Work Unit.

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Hunte & Foxley (2000) *Evaluation of the Ladder Project*. Unpublished.