
Key Stage 2 career-related learning pathfinder evaluation

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Introduction

The Career-Related Learning Pathfinder was a pilot programme which took place in seven Local Authorities (LAs) in 2010 with Key Stage 2 pupils. The main aims of the Pathfinder were to:

- Increase pupils' awareness of career/work opportunities;
- Increase their understanding of the link between education, qualifications and work opportunities;
- Reduce gender specific career/role stereotypes; and,
- Engage parents/carers in the process.

The then Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF) commissioned NFER to conduct an evaluation investigating the extent to which the Pathfinder pilot had achieved its original objectives, and to test the hypothesis that introducing career-related learning at Key Stage 2 (in disadvantaged areas) increases and widens pupils' education and career aspirations. The study was undertaken between July 2009 and October 2010.

Key findings

In relation to the four original aims of the Pathfinder pilot, the key findings were:

Aim 1: Increasing pupils' awareness of career/work opportunities

- Pupils involved in the Pathfinder pilot showed increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of types of employment and pathways to reach different types of employment; and,
- There was some evidence that the Pathfinder had helped to raise pupils' aspirations for the future and extend their horizons about what they could do in the future.

Aim 2: Increasing pupils' understanding of the link between education, qualifications and work opportunities

- Pupils involved in the Pathfinder pilot showed increased understanding of the link between education, qualifications and careers and a more positive attitude towards school and education; and,
- Elements of the Pathfinder had been built into the curriculum and underpinned delivery;

events, such as a university visit, or drama presentation, provided highlights and focused learning, and were reported as particularly successful.

Aim 3: Reducing gender specific career/role stereotypes

- Pupil survey results showed that over the course of the evaluation, Pathfinder pupils showed a greater decrease in stereotypical thinking and greater improvements in their perceptions of the effectiveness of career-related learning in their school than comparison pupils; and,
- The findings indicate that involvement in the Pathfinder pilot could be associated with greater decreases in pupils' stereotypical perceptions beyond that seen with usual career-related learning delivery in schools at Key Stage 2.

Aim 4: Engaging parents/carers in this process

- As had been anticipated at the start of the pilot, engaging parents/carers was viewed by schools and LA interviewees as the weakest element of the Pathfinder. This was also reflected in the survey findings, as although Pathfinder schools reported involving parents/carers in career-related learning to a greater extent than comparison schools, the difference was small and not every Pathfinder school was doing this; and,
- All case study schools had attempted to engage parents/carers, some more successfully than others. Overall, few schools had successfully engaged parents/carers in the Pathfinder pilot and this is a challenge that could be addressed if the programme continues. Some positive exemplars of good practice arose from the case studies which could be built on by other schools.

Background

Ensuring that children and young people have access to good quality information, advice and guidance (IAG) has been a concern of successive administrations, and in 2007, The Children's Plan 14-19 Expert Group recommended that IAG should be embedded at a younger age, as the natural focus for this has tended to be in secondary schools. The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures (Department for Children, Schools and Families, DCSF, 2007) committed the then DCSF to funding a project which would explore the impact of early career-related learning at Key Stage 2, focused mainly on Year 6, when pupils would be 10 or 11 years old.

The resulting Pathfinder pilot therefore focused on developing pupils' growing perception of their own place in the world of work. By enabling pupils to learn about themselves and the occupational choices they could have, through a programme of career-related learning, the intention was to help them develop a better view of their self-efficacy. This, according to Bandura et al., (2001) and reflected in Blenkinsop et al. (2006), is a key factor in raising young people's aspirations. In addition, the Pathfinders aimed to help pupils learn about the ways in which they could bring about their preferred occupational outcomes, even though they may live in disadvantaged areas.

Methodology

A multi-method approach was employed and based around three strands:

- **A scoping study:** Document reviews and telephone interviews with key personnel from seven LAs running the Pathfinder programme were employed to examine implementation plans and activities.
- **Quantitative data collection and analysis:** A quasi-experimental design was used,

involving 120 comparison schools matched to 38 Pathfinder (treatment) schools. Three surveys of the same pupils were conducted: one at pre-Pathfinder stage, in autumn 2009 (n=5,545); a second in spring 2010 (n=5,403) and a final Sweep in July 2010 (n=5,284). In addition, a school questionnaire was completed by headteachers at the time of the first (n=127) and third pupil survey Sweeps (n=108), to find out which career-related learning activities each school was engaged in.

- **Case studies:** Seven case study schools were selected, one in each participating LA, and they were visited in two stages: the first in late autumn 2009, at the beginning of the Pathfinder, and a follow-up visit in the summer term 2010, towards the end of the activities. In total, during the first round of visits, 60 face-to-face interviews were conducted with staff and pupils. The same interviewees (where possible) took part in the second visit; during the second round 63 interviews were conducted involving school staff, pupils, parents/carers and community Pathfinder partners.

The seven LAs in which the Pathfinder programme was undertaken were geographically spread across England, but were similar in having densely-populated urban areas with high levels of social and economic deprivation. The primary schools which were involved in the Pathfinder were invited to do so by their LAs because the challenges of their social environment were considered particularly relevant to the aims of the programme.

Findings

The principal findings are summarised here, under sub-headings of the four original aims of the pathfinder.

Aim 1: Increasing pupils' awareness of career/work opportunities

- Pupils involved in the Pathfinder pilot showed increased awareness, knowledge and understanding of types of employment and pathways to get there;
- The Pathfinder intervention was associated with an increase in career-related learning activity in these schools in comparison to what other similar schools were doing;
- School staff considered that the Pathfinder had suited their school ethos and assisted in broadening the horizons of pupils, increasing their confidence and resilience and encouraging greater realism in their future expectations; and,
- There was some evidence that the Pathfinder had helped to raise pupils' aspirations for the future and extend their horizons about what they could do in the future, for instance:
 - Between the baseline period and Sweep 2, pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) and pupils in Year 5 in Pathfinder schools showed a significant increase in confidence in their ability to do a professional level job in the future (although this difference was not sustained at Sweep 3);
 - Between baseline and Sweep 2, boys in Pathfinder schools showed a greater increase in confidence than girls in those schools that they could do a skilled job in the future (this difference was not sustained at Sweep 3);
 - Between baseline and Sweep 3, Pathfinder Year 5 pupils showed a greater increase in confidence in their ability to do a professional or a skilled job; and,
 - Case study findings suggested that the programme had helped some pupils to develop a deeper understanding of what they needed to do to achieve their future aspirations.

Aim 2: Increasing pupils' understanding of the link between education, qualifications and work opportunities

- Pupils involved in the Pathfinder pilot showed increased understanding of the link between education, qualifications and careers and a more positive attitude towards school and education; and,
- Elements of the Pathfinder had been built into the curriculum and underpinned delivery; events, such as a university visit, or drama presentation, provided highlights and focused learning, and were reported as particularly successful.

Aim 3: Reducing gender specific career/role stereotypes

- Pupil survey results showed that over the course of the evaluation, Pathfinder pupils showed a greater decrease in stereotypical thinking and greater improvements in their perceptions of the effectiveness of career-related learning in their school than comparison pupils;
- The findings indicate that involvement in the Pathfinder pilot could be associated with greater decreases in pupils' stereotypical perceptions beyond that seen with usual career-related learning delivery in schools at Key Stage 2; and,
- The Pathfinder may especially have been successful in decreasing stereotypical thinking among pupils about the jobs that they could do in the future, and closing the gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers in terms of their confidence in their ability to work effectively and their choices for the future.

Aim 4: Engaging parents/carers in this process

- As had been anticipated at the start of the pilot, engaging parents/carers was viewed by schools and LA interviewees as the weakest element of the Pathfinder. This was also reflected in the survey findings, as although Pathfinder schools reported involving parents/carers in career-related learning to a greater extent than comparison schools, the difference was small and not every Pathfinder school was doing this; and,
- All case study schools had attempted to engage parents/carers, some more successfully than others. Overall, few schools had successfully engaged parents/carers in the Pathfinder pilot and this is a challenge that could be addressed if the programme continues. Some positive exemplars of good practice arose from the case studies which could be built on by other schools.

Other key findings include:

Other benefits to pupils involved in the Pathfinder

Pupils involved in the Pathfinder pilot also showed evidence of:

- Improved skills, including team-work and independence;
- Increased understanding of different sources of help/advice about making choices;
- Increased self-confidence, especially around transition to secondary school. For example, at baseline, pupils eligible for FSM in Pathfinder schools had lower confidence than all otherwise similar pupils. By Sweeps 2 and 3, Pathfinder FSM eligible pupils showed a greater improvement in confidence than all otherwise similar pupils;
- Improved attendance and attainment, with a perception in some schools that this had helped to improve SATs results; and,
- The Pathfinder had been successfully linked in with preparation for transition to secondary school and was reported to have reduced pupils' concerns about transition.

Closing the gap

There was evidence from the survey that involvement in the Pathfinder helped to close the gap between pupils eligible for FSM and their peers, especially in terms of confidence in their ability to work effectively, and the types of jobs they perceived they could do in the future. The Pathfinder also appears to be particularly effective at meeting the career-related learning needs of more vulnerable pupils (such as those with Special Educational Needs [SEN]). By the end of the Pathfinder, more disadvantaged pupils felt that skilled and professional jobs were an option for them.

Increasing confidence and self-esteem

Case study evidence showed that despite the pilot's official title, the Pathfinder was considered to be about more than raising aspirations, which was a term considered by some interviewees to carry a value-judgement. It was about extending pupils' horizons by increasing their awareness of the different choices and pathways open to them in the future, and building their confidence and self-esteem. In particular, school staff had used the Pathfinder pilot to encourage realistic aspirations and to show pupils the routes towards achieving these.

Curriculum integration

According to school staff, the main elements of the Pathfinder provided a useful structure to schools, which they could supplement with their own chosen career-related learning activities. School staff welcomed the opportunity to have the flexibility to develop innovative and diverse provision of career-related learning, tailored to meet the specific requirements of their pupils. School staff also reported positively on the value of the links between the Pathfinder and work on transition from primary to secondary school, and the greater confidence with which pupils now approached transition.

Partnerships

The Pathfinder pilot had helped to bring together schools, parents/carers, the local community and local businesses and so tapped into the social capital of local communities. Contact with local places of work and further and higher education had not only increased pupils' awareness of different career options and pathways, but also provided them with positive role models, some of which were particularly useful in challenging gender-based stereotypes.

Conclusions

Set against the developing priorities for education in England, the weight and constancy of the evidence collected is positive. The fact that all case study schools were intending to continue the Pathfinder despite the end of additional funding, and that some schools intended to extend it lower down in Key Stage 2, is testament to the perceived benefits of the Pathfinder.

Although it was introduced before the change in government, the evidence suggests that the programme has the potential to fit well with the developing priorities for education in England, in particular in its potential to help 'close the gap' for disadvantaged pupils, to encourage schools to develop a curriculum and practices that best suit their circumstances, and to give impetus to building strong local partnerships.

References

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Blenkinsop, S., McCrone, T., Wade, P. and Morris, M. (2006). How do Young People Make Choices at Age 14 and Age 16? ([DfES Research Report 773](#)). London: DfES.

DCSF (2007). The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures (Department for Children, Schools and Families: London)

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>

Further information about this research can be obtained from
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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.