

# **SOCIAL EXCLUSION - THE ROLE OF POOR BASIC SKILLS**

## ***Introduction***

Thank you for the invitation to speak today. Most of you are concerned with a wide range of factors which contribute to excluding young people from our society. I'm sure that all of these various factors play a part in alienating all too many young people and unless we can make a concerted effort to involve and make young people feel a part of the development of our society we will face considerable problems in the next few years.

While poor education is not the only cause of exclusion, I believe it plays a major part. A good education tends to give access to increasing opportunities, however disadvantaged you might have been when you started life. As many people from ethnic minority groups in the UK have realised, education is the way out of the ghetto of low skilled jobs, unemployment and poverty.

I want to concentrate on the part poor basic skills plays in the social exclusion of young people.

## ***The Basic Skills Agency***

My agency is a very small national organisation. Although we are funded by Government, we value our independence and you shouldn't take anything I say as reflecting the view of our Government. We are essentially a development agency attempting to help to raise standards and reduce the number of people who have very real difficulties with skills most of us take for granted.

We are responsible for the development of basic skills in both England and Wales. Much of our work is trying to make sure that improving basic skills is not just seen as the responsibility of schools and colleges. We want to involve a whole range of agencies and organisations that already have contact with people who have benefited little from the education system. It is only by making basic skills an issue for these agencies and organisations that we can have a real impact.

## **Basic Skills**

6. I've already used the term 'basic skills' rather a lot, so it's about time perhaps that I defined it. By basic skills I mean:

***'the ability to read, write, and speak in English and use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general'.***

7. So I mean being able to understand and speak English [or Welsh if Welsh is your first language], being able to read and write and use numbers. We don't include knowledge and understanding of technology, although some people argue that this is now a basic skill.

## **The Scale of Need**

8. It's important to say that we have very few people who are 'illiterate' or 'innumerate' in the UK. 'Illiterate' in the sense that they can't read or write at all; 'innumerate' in the sense that they can't even recognise numbers.
9. Our problem is that we have a significant minority of people who have so little mastery of these basic skills that they struggle at work and at home with many everyday tasks. Some can read very little; others can read, but only slowly and with little understanding. Most can write in the sense that they can handle a pen or pencil but may have no idea how to spell or construct a sentence. Some find it difficult to add simple figures; others may be able to do this but can't deal with anything much more difficult.
10. Research suggests that about 1 in 6 people have very real problems with these basic skills in the UK. That's about 6 million people.
11. There is little difference apparently between the number of young people who have problems with basic skills and the number of older people who have the same difficulties. More elderly people have difficulties, but this is almost entirely due to the effects of ageing - poorer sight, difficulties with concentration etc.
12. Much of our research is based on a group of people born in one week of 1970. We have studied this group for some years and a good deal of information is available about them. We assessed a representative sample of 1,650 of these young people in 1991 when they were 21 years old.
13. At that time:
- *About 4 in 100 of the people assessed could not answer a question about a simple advert for a concert;*
  - *almost 1 in 3 could not answer a question about hypothermia after reading a page from a First Aid manual.*
  - *1 in 7 could not calculate the change from £20 if they had spent £17.89;*
  - *almost 1 in 10 found it difficult to understand information on a map;*
  - *almost 1 in 3 could not add together £1.40, £3.86, £7.15 and 79 pence;*
  - *1 in 5 could not work out what 10% of £4,900 was.*

14. In a changing, ever more complex society, difficulties with this level of skill presents considerable problems.

### ***Why do we have a basic skills problem?***

15. By now you're probably asking yourself how we have got into this position? Certainly, until a few years ago most people believed that pretty well everyone left school having mastered these key skills.
16. What seems clear is that we have had a problem for some years. I believe there are three broad reasons for this.
17. Some people have been poorly taught. Too many teachers are not adequately trained to teach basic skills and assessment and diagnosis has often been poor. Too many teachers fail to spot children in need of additional help. In the study we have just published of the educational experience of the 1970 group, we found that many people who were very poor or poor readers when assessed at age 21 were not felt by their teachers to have had a problem at age 16.
18. Only 35% of those whose reading scores were very low at 21 were described as 'reading impaired' at age 16. Only 15% of those with moderately low scores at 21 were described as 'reading impaired'<sup>1</sup> at age 16. There was a similar, but weaker, relationship in basic maths.
19. Even where children have been identified sometimes they haven't had the additional help that may have made a difference. In the same study, based on this group who were at school between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s, less than half [43%] of those who were in the very low reading group when assessed at age 21, had been in a remedial class in primary school. Only about a third [32%] of those in the very low numeracy group at 21 had received remedial provision in primary school.
20. Yet poor basic skills are, it seems, relatively predictable. Performing poorly in pre-reading and other tests at age 5 is a relatively good predictor of problems with basic skills after school. Performing poorly at age 10 is even better as a predictor.
21. I won't go into all of the other factors that make a difference except to say that watching television didn't seem to have much impact, but the role of parents did.
22. Secondly, there has been a change in the level of demand for basic skills. Rudimentary skills, which may have been good enough at one time, are no longer adequate. To be fully literate and numerate people have got to have greater mastery of these key skills and be able to use them at a higher level. All the evidence is that the level of demand will continue to increase well into the next century whatever technological developments take place.
23. Finally, a culture has been allowed to develop in some communities - a culture that sees little benefit in education and training. Often teachers see themselves as fighting a losing battle against increasingly ingrained values that are anti-learning, anti-education; a culture that seems to offer more than an education system that has failed them and seems likely to fail their children.

## ***The Effects of Poor Basic Skills***

24. The impact of poor basic skills are severe. Recently a man who won the National Lottery revealed that he couldn't read or write and this was hailed as an example of how these skills are not essential. Good luck to him but he's the exception. The equivalent of a 95 year old, healthy, heavy smoker that proves tobacco to be harmless!
25. I won't attempt to describe all of the disadvantages that come with poor basic skills. But these are some of the most important.
26. The intergenerational effect is significant. Parents with poor basic skills are much more likely to have children who struggle with basic skills at school. Furthermore, we know that young women with poor basic skills tend to have children earlier and have more children before they are in their early 20s than other young women. These young women tend to leave the workforce early - a workforce where they find it difficult to compete - largely for childbearing.
27. Young people with poor basic skills tend to be unemployed more frequently and for about 5 times longer than other unemployed young people. They are over represented amongst the unemployed even at 21 and are over represented on government training schemes. When they are in work they have lower lifetime earnings and less job security.
28. There is also a considerable impact of our economy. In an independent survey last year Gallup estimated that poor basic skills cost the UK economy £4.8 billion a year.
29. Just as important is the impact on the individual. The lack of ability to respond to change in an unpredictable world, a world of lost opportunities, marred by a continuing sense of failure and embarrassment.

## ***What can be done?***

30. All of this is depressing. And you could add more, such as the poorly explored link between poor basic skills and crime. So what can we do?
31. We need a coherent strategy to improve the effectiveness of pre-school and school education. We have led the development of family literacy programmes and I believe that these have the potential to make a real difference in raising standards among parents and preventing failure of children. Family literacy programmes work with parents who have poor basic skills and their children because if you can improve the basic skills of the parents, they will play a key role in preventing the failure of their children.
32. Better identification of difficulties in school is needed and the government has now done much to put this in place. If you can identify where additional help is required early enough, you can make a difference before a sense of failure and dejection sets in.
33. We need to do more to motivate older children, particularly those in their teens, to improve weak basic skills. This will not be easy and we need innovatory approaches not approaches that repeat previous failure. Too much of what goes on at present is little more than a repeat of what went on in the primary school.
34. We also need to be honest with young people about the importance of basic skills. There's often been too much protection of young people from reality and dishonesty. We need to be straight with people and get them to accept a sense of responsibility for their actions or lack of them.

35. We need to make sure that programmes for people who have left school are effective. Specific courses in colleges and adult education centres will not be attractive to everyone and we need programmes as part of training, social and economic regeneration, health, housing etc. As I said earlier we need to get a whole range of organisations involved including agencies that work closely with disadvantaged young people and adults.

### ***Conclusion***

36. Whatever we do there will be no quick fix. Short-term initiatives and 'magic bullet' answers won't work with a problem of such long standing. We need to raise expectations - of parents, teachers and young people themselves - and we need steady consistent effort. Poor basic skills are not the only reason why some young people feel alienated and excluded from our society; they may not even be the most important reason.
37. Poor basic skills are not the educational equivalent of AIDs; it's not life threatening. But it does lead to a life of lost opportunities; of endless frustration; of a deep seated sense of failure; of alienation and exclusion from the society we live in.