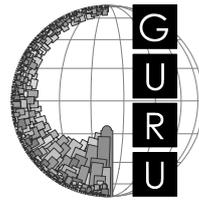


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**School of Architecture, Planning & Landscape
Global Urban Research Unit
University of Newcastle upon Tyne**

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**PREPARING FOR EXPERIENCE: THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LEAVING
HOME AND HOUSING EDUCATION**

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By Jamie Harding, Division of Housing Studies
University of Northumbria at Newcastle
Northumberland Building, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE1 8ST**

Contact: kim.mccartney@ncl.ac.uk

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ABSTRACT

The response to the apparent increase in the number of young people who become homeless has often been a call for provision of more leaving home and housing education. The initial stage of the research described in this paper found that, despite the popularity among the statutory and voluntary sector of such a measure, the use of leaving home learning resources in the North East of England was minimal. It appears that the barriers to providing effective housing and leaving home education are firstly practical (for example, the lack of space in the school curriculum) and arise secondly from the difficulties involved in teaching young people about a phenomenon of which they have no concrete experience, i.e. living in independent accommodation. This second difficulty is considered in terms of Kolb's experiential learning cycle. The later stage of the research considered how leaving home and housing education can overcome the absence of a concrete experience stage in Kolb's cycle by examining a learning resources and considering the experience of its use within the North East. One worker's use of the resource was compared to the experience of another worker of teaching in a school on the subject of citizenship - an area in which young people can have concrete experience. A comparison of the two forms of education provided insights into the extent to which the 'missing link' in Kolb's cycle can be overcome and young people can be more effectively prepared for leaving home.

There appears to be a consensus among academics that increasing numbers of young people have become homeless in recent years. For example, Craig et.al. (1995, p.48) noted:

..there is consistent evidence that the average age of homeless people is falling and is now in the mid-30s with the most dramatic rise in the newly homeless population of people under 25 years of age.

Such conclusions tend to be drawn from studies of the users of services for homeless people. The 1993-94 annual report of Centrepont Soho noted:

The young people Centrepont sees today are very different from those who first came through our doors back in 1969. Then, they were mainly men in their late teens or early twenties who had come to London to look for work. Today, almost 60 per cent of the young people we see are men and 40 per cent are women. They have become younger and more vulnerable. The average age of the young people is now 18 years and almost 4 in 10 are between 16 and 17 years old.

The apparent increase in homelessness among young people can be attributed either to individual or structural factors, or to a combination of the two. Writers adopting the structural perspective can point to a shortage of housing (e.g. Greve, 1991), the influence of economic decline (e.g. Harding and Kirk, 1996) or cuts in the benefits available to young people (e.g. Mee, 1996) as factors likely to increase the incidence of homelessness. In contrast, Murray (1990, p.21-22) blames young people themselves for their homelessness, arguing that they are part of an underclass which has brought disadvantage on itself by acting in an irresponsible manner.

Another individually based, but more sympathetic, approach is to blame young people's homelessness on their lack of the knowledge and skills needed for independent living. This approach appears to have more evidence to support it than the hostile interpretation of Murray, which has been widely criticised (e.g. Walker, 1990; Rodger, 1992, p.59-61). Thornton (1990, p.20) cited a Shelter survey of 16-20 year olds in schools and colleges in Hertfordshire in 1986, in which 90 per cent of respondents believed that the local authority would provide them with accommodation on request and 98 per cent thought that the council would do so if they were homeless, even if single and childless. Respondents substantially underestimated council waiting times, private sector rent levels and average house prices in the region. More recent research by Scottish Homes (Wilson et. al., 1996, p.vii) found that young people had little concept of a 'housing system' in Scotland.

Support for housing and leaving home education as a remedy for youth homelessness is provided by both the voluntary and statutory sectors. Gholam (1993, p.1) noted that one of Shelter's recommendations after research into homelessness among young women in 1991 (*Wherever I Lay My Hat*) was that schools and colleges should initiate teaching sessions on leaving home. A major recommendation of the Thompson Committee Review Group on the Youth Service in 1983 was that more counselling, advice and information should be made available to teenagers, on housing as well as on other issues. (Thornton, 1990, p.69-70).

Statutory support for the provision of leaving home and housing education is provided by the DoE's (1991) Code of Guidance on Part 3 of the 1985 Housing Act, which identified education as:

...crucial to help young people with independent living, and to ensure that they are aware of the risks of homelessness. Housing authorities should therefore liaise closely

with local education authorities to get schools to include projects on housing and homelessness in their curricula. Young people should be encouraged to discuss, and to be given information on, housing options so that they have a realistic idea of the implications of leaving home and living independently, and of the potential pitfalls. Here....voluntary groups may have a role to play. (quoted in Gholam, 1993, p2).

Education policy also acknowledges the importance of young people being aware of housing issues. The National Curriculum Council's guidance (8) on education for citizenship recommends including the skills and attitudes of 'recognising and defining the nature of a problem, e.g. homelessness' and 'a constructive interest in community affairs.' At key stage 4, a unit of work is suggested where:

pupils investigate the causes, benefits and disadvantages of leaving home. Through research and discussion they identify and analyse the various options open to those who leave home including sources of help. They think about the problems and look at different ways of solving them. (quoted in Gholam, 1993, p.2).

So the provision of leaving home and housing education, although rarely defined, is a measure which has support from within both the voluntary and the statutory sector. However, it appears that very little of such education is being provided to young people within the North East. This conclusion was drawn from contact with the two organisations in England identified by Wilson et. al. (1996, p.43) as providers of leaving home resources - Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing Foundation and the Centrepont Leaving Home Project.

Although Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing Foundation were able to identify six North East organisations that had purchased their leaving home resource pack (entitled *Where Will I Live?*), only one was found to have used it to provide leaving home and housing education to young people. Two organisations had purchased the pack but never used it, one had used the pack as background information for a funding application to develop a similar resource, one (Banks of the Wear Community Housing Association) had used the pack as an aid to developing a resource intended to teach young people about citizenship, and one could not be traced from the address provided, despite a search of two telephone directories. The Centrepont Leaving Home Project reported that they had sent materials to organisations within the North East region but that their contact with schools and other bodies had been only sporadic.

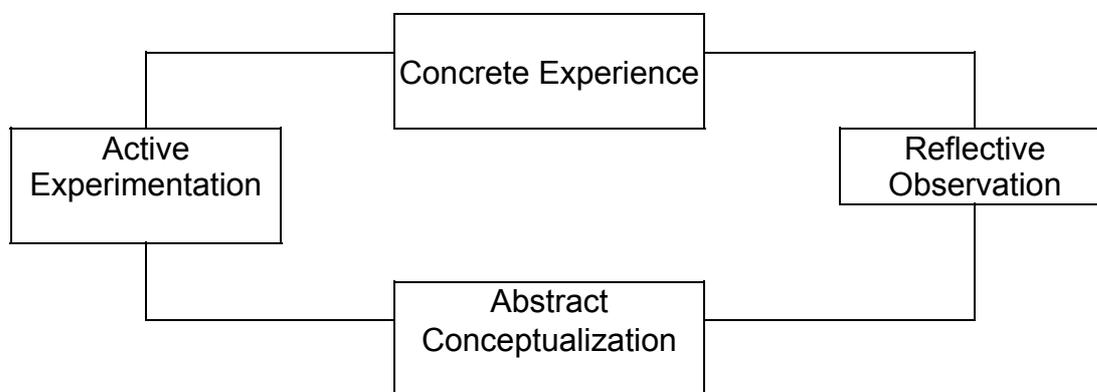
The apparent lack of housing and leaving home education within the region may be explained by a number of practical difficulties, particularly if such education is to be provided as part of the school curriculum. The research of Wilson et al (1996, p.12) suggested that teachers in Scotland were unlikely to have a well developed awareness of the housing system and housing options. Their views were largely informed by their own personal experience. Jones (1995, p.150) noted that many young people interviewed about their housing experiences expressed a wish to have been given talks in schools not by teachers but by outsiders such as staff of social security or housing departments.

However, even if such outsiders were brought into schools, practical problems would still remain. Wilson et al (1996, p.17) noted that, especially in the fourth and fifth years of secondary school, there was increasing pressure on the timetable and the curriculum. The spread of HIV infection and AIDS had led to significant amounts of time being devoted to health education. In addition, anecdotal evidence from a neighbourhood housing manager working for Newcastle City Council, who had been involved in work in schools, suggested that the young people most in need of the

education were often not in school when he visited. This is consistent with the finding of Jones (1995, p.150) that young people who truant from school are often those most in need of leaving home and housing education.

Another difficulty identified by the neighbourhood manager, which would be relevant wherever education was provided, was that young people did not realise that the information presented to them might, at some point in the future, be relevant to them. This point was also made by Whitehead and Salisbury (1980). It is consistent with the findings of Wilson et al (1996, p.10-12) that few young people anticipated leaving home within three years of leaving school and that there was little awareness among young people at school that this was a life decision that they would make imminently. As a result, there was a relative indifference to housing choices.

The reason for this perceived lack of relevance may be found within educational theory, by considering Kolb's experiential learning theory and the experiential learning cycle which is shown below:



According to Kolb (cited in Gibbs, 1988, p.10-11), this cycle may be entered by the learner at any point but its stages must be followed in sequence. Experience is used to test out ideas and assumptions rather than to obtain practice passively. This emphasis on the part that experience plays differentiates Kolb's theory from other theories of the learning process. The core of the model is that experience is translated into concepts, which in turn are used as guides in the choice of new experiences. (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985, p.12).

The obvious question for leaving home and housing education is whether a concrete experience stage can be introduced before a young person leaves home. A pessimistic application of Kolb's theory might be to conclude that the extent of active learning which can be achieved is extremely limited because, prior to leaving home, a young person can pass only once through a maximum of three stages. This difficulty would not apply if leaving home and housing education were to be an ongoing measure with young people living in independent accommodation, but the emphasis in the literature is clearly on using leaving home education as a preventative measure, with people who have not yet left home, in an attempt to prevent them from subsequently becoming homeless.

A more optimistic application of the theory might note that, even among young people who have yet to leave home, there is likely to be some concrete experience of the skills which will be needed in

independent living. This is illustrated by unpublished research by Newcastle City Council (*Survey Of Young People Moving Into Independent Living*, available from the chief executive's research section) which examined the skills and experiences of young people who had applied for council housing between the ages of 16 and 17. Over three quarters of the sample said that they felt quite well prepared for leaving care or home and living independently, although the percentage varied between those who had already made a move and those who were waiting to do so. 86 per cent of the total sample knew how to cook proper meals, 97 per cent were able to iron their clothes, 89 per cent said they were able to turn electricity and gas on and off, and 86 per cent knew how to use a heating system.

Young people may also have had concrete experience of using skills such as budgeting, although budgeting before leaving home may mean ensuring that enough money is left at the end of the week to go out, rather than to pay a bill. The Shelter research cited by Thornton (1990, p.20) suggested that it was specific knowledge about obtaining housing, rather than particular domestic skills, that young people lacked prior to leaving home. This is the area where it would appear to be most difficult to introduce a concrete experience stage into learning.

In order to establish whether Kolb's experiential learning cycle could be completed despite the lack of concrete experience of leaving home, Yorkshire Metropolitan Housing Foundation's *Where Will I Live?* pack was examined in detail. This pack contains information sheets about various issues relating to leaving home and housing, together with twenty-five exercises designed to encourage active learning. The exercises were each classified according to which part of Kolb's experiential learning cycle they fell into (in some cases, exercises fell into more than one category.) Nineteen of the exercises were found to involve abstract conceptualisation, seven to involve active experimentation and eight to involve reflective observation.

The classification of so many activities as abstract conceptualisation appears to be linked to the nature of leaving home education: young people are being asked to imagine a scenario which they have not yet encountered, i.e. living away from home. Examples of activities that involved abstract conceptualisation were a sentence completion exercise asking young people to identify reasons why, for example, it is difficult to obtain a council house; and a brainstorming session asking them to identify the belongings that they would take with them if they were given thirty minutes to pack and leave their present home.

In the category of active experimentation was placed any exercise where a young person could see a specific 'outcome'. Examples were a design / planning exercise in which they were presented with a plan of a bare room and a budget and asked how they would go about furnishing and decorating, and a project which involved producing a local guide for young people, particularly those who were homeless.

Perhaps the most important feature of the pack was that young people, although unable to make reflective observations on living away from home, were encouraged to reflect on other relevant experience. One activity which involved reflective observation was a sentence completion exercise where young people completed personal statements such as: 'My biggest problem with money is....' One workshop combined reflective observation with abstract conceptualisation by asking young people to identify the domestic skills which they used in their present situation and the additional skills which they would need when living independently.

So reflective observation on related concrete experience seemed to be the key strategy employed by the pack to complete Kolb's cycle. In order to evaluate this strategy, an interview was conducted with the North East housing professional who had used the *Where Will I Live?* pack with young people. This experience was contrasted with the work of Banks of the Wear Community Housing Association in delivering a model about citizenship to young people in a school. The comparison was based on the assumption that it would be easier to give young people an understanding of the concept of citizenship (something which they could be involved in immediately) rather than the concept of leaving home (which they had yet to experience.)

The housing professional who had made use of the *Where Will I Live?* pack had done so in her capacity as a part time youth worker at a local authority youth club. She had been involved in providing a series of informal social education sessions, one of which was about housing and leaving home. The group consisted of women aged 13-20 and the session lasted between an hour and an hour and a half.

Participation in the education was voluntary so the young women who attended were the ones who had an interest in the topic under discussion. Most had no intention of leaving home in the near future, although many were living in unstable housing conditions.

The worker had begun by showing the young women a video (produced by Swingbridge Video) concerning the process of leaving home. This had been followed by an adaptation of a budgeting exercise included in the *Where Will I Live?* pack - the young women were asked how much they thought they would need to live on each week (if they were living independently) before being told what their level of Income Support would be. This was followed by two of the quizzes in the pack - one concerning the age at which people could receive certain housing related services and the other a true or false quiz about various aspects of housing policy. Finally, the worker discussed with the young women the sort of situations that her clients in her housing work had had to face.

In contrast, the Banks of the Wear module was used at a school in Langbaugh and was presented over a much longer time scale (every week for ten weeks.) It was intended that the module would consist of sixteen lesson plans. However, the high level of interest in the material presented - particularly one session about barriers to participation in a local youth club - meant that the module could not be completed. Brainstorming sessions were a particularly popular method of learning and a role play where members of the class took on the role of councillors and residents was also popular. The Banks of the Wear worker was pleased with the reaction of the young people to the module and felt that they were better equipped for citizenship as a result of the education.

The worker who used the *Where Will I Live?* pack also felt that she had largely met her aims, i.e. to show young people that it would be unwise for them to leave home unless they had to, but that there was an alternative to remaining in an intolerable home situation (for example, if there was abuse occurring.) The various parts to the session had different effects on the young people. The video was thought to be entertaining but not very realistic. The money exercise had a larger impact: the young women were described as 'gobsmacked' when it was revealed how much Income Support they would actually receive if they were living independently. The quiz was fun and seemed to impart some information - the women had mainly believed that entitlement to all services began at eighteen and were keen to discover where they could go for different services. However, the best response seemed to be secured by the worker talking about her experiences of working with young people who were trying to live independently. The real life scenarios seemed to be what challenged the women to think most.

The worker believed that one thing that the leaving home education had achieved was that the young women she had spoken to would now approach her if they experienced housing difficulties. However, she believed that some written information as to what to do in a crisis would also be useful because it would give young people something to keep: this information would have to be produced locally as a key feature would be addresses and telephone numbers of agencies that could provide assistance.

Two aspects of this evaluation were echoed by the Banks of the Wear staff member. The first was the value of personal experience: the citizenship module was a partnership in which his background - in community development work, in tenant participation and in youth work - made an important contribution to the learning. Those different backgrounds were a tool that young people could use for their development.

The second shared conclusion was the need for written information about services available to young people seeking to live independently. The age group that the citizenship module was presented to was 13-14 year olds, so leaving home was not yet imminent but - as part of the preparation for the work in the school - information available to young people about housing related services was sought out. The information was sparse and spread over a large number of agencies. There did not seem to be a resource centre for young people's housing issues, so it might have proved difficult for young people to access the resources that were available.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to establish the practical constraints to providing housing and leaving home education and the limits to the effectiveness of such education, given the apparent impossibility of a young person who has yet to leave home going through the 'concrete experience' stage of Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Taking the question of effectiveness first, the examination of the *Where Will I Live?* pack, and the interviews with the two workers, suggested methods by which direct concrete experience of leaving home could be replaced and so Kolb's experiential learning cycle completed.

The leaving home education session which was discussed reflected the make up of the pack itself, in that activities mainly fell into the abstract conceptualisation section of Kolb's cycle. Young people were asked to conceptualise the cost of living independently, the age at which they could receive services and other housing related issues. Their ideas were then compared with the reality (this is a form of active experimentation.) In contrast, the citizenship module consisted mainly of young people's reflective observation on their own concrete experience.

Despite the emphasis on different stages of Kolb's cycle, both workers did seek to complete the cycle. In the case of the citizenship model, the role play provided elements of abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. The worker presenting the *Where Will I Live?* pack was able to introduce an element of concrete experience by describing the experiences of young people that she had worked with in her housing capacity. This experience (although third hand for the young people attending the youth club) added much to the education and caused reflective observation to take place.

In both cases, the workers stressed the value of their own experience of the phenomenon in question when providing education to young people. This illustrates the advantage of practical experience over mere theoretical understanding as a teaching tool. The need for reflective observation on

experience (however indirect) of 'real life' housing situations seems critical in raising the interest and awareness of young people.

Both workers emphasised the need for written information for young people who are leaving home. This may be a result of the limitations of the forms of concrete experience which are available to a young person who is not living independently. When they leave home, it seems likely that their direct personal experience will be more effective in completing Kolb's cycle: the written information will be a resource that is available to them at the point of need rather than in advance of it.

These conclusions should be qualified by noting that the research was based on a small amount of data and was in itself a piece of work that lacked a concrete experience stage: the assessment of the effectiveness of leaving home education and citizenship education was based on the abstract conceptualisation of professionals as to how much better young people would have been able to cope with leaving home or citizenship. A longitudinal study, comparing some young people who had received leaving home education to others who had not, would give a clearer indication of the effectiveness of this initiative in preventing young people from becoming homeless.

Despite the limitations of the research, the findings suggest that second or third hand experience of leaving home can help to complete the 'missing link' in Kolb's cycle in leaving home and housing education. Reflective observation on the experience of others, or on related experiences of their own, can be effective to some extent in preparing young people for living independently.

However, at the practical level, it is difficult to see means of expanding the provision of housing and leaving home education beyond its present low level in the North East, given the absence of funding for such work. Although housing education is included within the National Curriculum, this paper has suggested that there are a number of reasons why such education tends to be ineffective if provided by teachers in the classroom, i.e. the lack of knowledge of most teachers, the pressure on the curriculum and the absence from school of many young people who are most in need of the education.

If the provision of housing education by teachers is problematic, housing professionals seem the obvious group to suggest as an alternative, ideally in a setting other than school. Wilson et al (1996, p.21) argued that there may be advantages for landlords in becoming involved in leaving home and housing education with young people. Their interviews with housing managers in a number of housing associations suggested that the potential benefits of improving relationships with young people included reduced vandalism and anti-social behaviour and increased awareness of the responsibilities of tenants. However, the proposed benefits must be balanced against the increasing pressure being placed on housing professionals to provide economic justification for the use of their time, rather than to undertake work where there is no imminent and tangible benefit.

If this pressure is to be resisted, housing professionals must argue the case with their employers that prevention is better than cure, and that time invested in housing education will be repaid in future years by reduced youth homelessness and a greater sense of responsibility on the part of tenants. The youth service must similarly play a part, by making opportunities for discussion of housing and leaving home with as many young people as possible, and contacting housing organisations to ask that staff visit to make a contribution to those discussions. The research described in this paper suggests that such discussions will be most effective when they take place in an informal setting and draw on the experiences of young people in housing need.

It should finally be noted that, even if the level of housing and leaving home education is raised, this will not in itself be sufficient to eliminate youth homelessness. However good the education which is provided in advance of leaving home is, this research has suggested that it becomes more important at the point of leaving home, when the experience becomes first hand. For this reason, leaving home education cannot be seen as a solution to youth homelessness on its own, but will only be effective as part of a range of solutions which include interventions at the point of homelessness.

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