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# A qualitative research study to explore young people's disengagement from learning



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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Assembly Government

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## Table of contents

Acknowledgements.....	3
Report Summary.....	4
Section 1: Introduction .....	10
Section 2: Methodology .....	12
Section 3: Literature Review .....	27
Section 4: Findings from the Research with Young People .....	37
Section 5: Conclusions and Policy Implications .....	65
Bibliography .....	72

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## Report summary

1. This qualitative research into young people's disengagement from learning was commissioned in November 2009 in response to a commitment in the One Wales agreement to establish an "enquiry into disengagement from learning amongst children and young people to look at evidence of what works". The objectives of the research project were to:
  - Engage with young people to participate in a small scale qualitative research study to explore their perspectives on their disengagement from learning;
  - Explore young people's satisfaction with the teaching and learning they have received and identify the 'triggers' for young people who become disengaged from learning;
  - Investigate the school and curriculum factors (including context and delivery of the curriculum and the classroom context) that most influence the route to disengagement;
  - Identify the impact of disengagement attitudes and behaviours on post-16 aspirations; and
  - Provide empirical evidence for policy development and recommendations to inform future research linked to the One Wales enquiry.
  
2. The research set out to capture young people's own views and experiences of disengagement and was structured around a literature review on disengagement from school and qualitative interviews with forty-seven young people in Wales aged between 11-16 years.

Table A: Characteristics of interviewees					
Character of setting's catchment area	'Valleys'	'urban and Valleys'	'rural'	'urban and rural'	'urban'
	10	3	9	11	14

Age	16 yrs	15 yrs	14 yrs	13 yrs	12 yrs
	12	16	8	5	6

Gender	30 males	17 females
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Level of disengagement	'severely' disengaged	'moderately' disengaged
	24	23

Type of learning provision	mainstream provision	'alternative' provision
	24	23

3. The scope of the study allowed for only a limited review of literature and a search protocol was agreed with the client, the Welsh Assembly Government, appropriate to the scope of the study and the time available. The review drew on 69 reports and documents on disengagement.
  
4. The fieldwork was intended to enrich the existing research on disengagement through the narratives of young people in Wales. The aim was to capture an unmediated voice from young people and no attempt was made to balance what was being said through contributions from practitioners in the learning settings these young people attended. The aim was to present the experience as the young people described it, with their interpretation of events and analysis of cause and effect.

## Key findings

5. The literature review found that the amount of material on disengagement based specifically on evidence gathered from young people was relatively limited. Within the 69 studies reviewed, for example, most of the literature was based upon evidence gathered from sources such as interviews with teachers (and other key stakeholders) rather than from interviews with young people.
6. The fieldwork for this research invited young people to talk through their school experiences. As shown in Table A above, half of the young people were no longer following a mainstream curriculum and twenty-one were in provision that was either totally or partially delivered out of school. All the young people interviewed were identified by intermediaries (teachers, youth workers or community workers) to be moderately or severely disengaged. The data generated by interviews with young people largely backs up the findings of the literature review. Both stress the importance of understanding the complexity of needs amongst young people who are disengaging from school. The causes of disengagement are rarely simple and frequently involve a cumulative mix of factors linked to personal social and emotional development, life events, school, child and family coping strategies and attitudes to learning.
7. The key findings of the research were structured around six themes agreed with the study's steering group:
8. **Curriculum:** the literature review identified five broad themes around the curriculum in tackling disengagement. These were around the breadth and relevance (to the target group of young people) of the curriculum offer; curriculum flexibility and learner centred approaches; and the involvement of a range of providers.

The interviews with young people suggested that wider curriculum choice and flexibility can help those who are moderately disengaged to re-engage, but that curriculum choice for the severely disengaged is very limited and defined by what is available locally.

9. **Learning:** The two common themes to emerge from the literature review around learning were around engaging learning styles and adopting targeted interventions and support. Interviews with young people stressed the importance of enjoyment and the value young people place upon some types of additional support, such as that offered by smaller class sizes. However, the review also suggests that self-efficacy is a key determinant of enjoyment and that some types of intervention, such as being placed in “special” sets were disliked and actually contribute to a sense of disengagement.
10. **Teaching:** Many studies highlighted the value of using different kinds of teaching techniques and issues around the quality of teaching methods and consistency. Young people in the research appreciated variety in lessons and the chance that working in small groups provided to interact with a tutor or teacher.
11. **Relationships:** The literature demonstrated the importance of young people and parents developing and maintaining effective relationships with teachers and school staff and of the structures and processes that could facilitate this. The importance of peer relationships was also raised. The role of relationships also emerged as a strong theme in the research with young people, which highlighted how the breakdown of relationships with teachers could trigger disengagement. The research also identified the salience of bullying as a key factor in disengagement. Most of those who had suffered from bullying over a long period felt that the



school had not intervened effectively and, as a result, the bullying had had a serious impact on their education, both because it caused them to miss school in order to avoid the bullies and it prevented them from playing a full role in school activities when they were in school.

12. **Skills:** The most common theme from the literature review was the need to develop the social, emotional, and behavioural skills of young people. This was reflected in the research with young people. There was some evidence that disruptive behaviour in school was related to family problems, to difficulties with friends or bullies or to problems caused after periods of illness. However, in many ways the key issue to emerge was not what events caused or exacerbated disengagement but why those particular events, experiences or problems, which affect many children and young people, cause some to disengage. The power of these incidents to disrupt the child or young person's education needs to be related to the individual child or young person's capacity for coping, or their social and emotional skills, and the support they had at the time.
  
13. **Causes of disengagement:** A number of studies identified the importance of early identification and the need for a holistic approach. Disengagement is frequently a consequence of a breakdown in the pupil / school relationship and both the literature and fieldwork identify a range of factors that can strain and ultimately break this relationship. The research found real difficulty in isolating the circularity of cause and effects within disengagement, in that symptoms such as truancy quickly become causes when missed lessons meant that class work became too hard. The research also illustrated the chronic nature of some characteristics of disengagement and some of the young people

interviewed had clearly been identified as having specific behaviour or coping difficulties right from their earliest years in school.

## **Implications and recommendations**

14. The research identified the need for approaches that tackle long-term chronic problems within families that can make it hard for children to fully engage with and benefit from school. This illustrates the importance of schools working with Children and Young People's Partnerships to both identify needs and tackle their root causes. It also highlights the importance of tackling an holistic, long-term view of a child's support needs and developing a programme that can follow the child through different schools and monitor progress.
15. The research also identified the importance of stopping disruptions to attendance in class from leading to serious educational disadvantage. This needs to involve looking at why some young people are missing lessons and tackling these causes and ensuring that if lessons are missed there are strategies for catching up with the work.
16. Finally the research considered the findings on re-engagement in learning and how this can be sustained as young people progress from highly supportive programmes to mainstream college, training or employment options.

## Section 1: Introduction

### Introduction to the study, including aims and objectives

- 1.1. Disengagement from learning is a serious concern. It is associated with a range of negative outcomes for both individual young people and for society as a whole, including lower levels of achievement, an increased risk of being not in employment, education or training (NEET), an increased risk of anti-social and criminal behaviour, substance misuse and teenage pregnancy.
- 1.2. Given these concerns, the One Wales Agreement includes a commitment to establish an “enquiry into disengagement from learning amongst children and young people to look at evidence of what works. The remit will include the transition from primary to secondary schools, the curriculum, the delivery of post-16 education and the potential of personalised learning.” In response, this six month research project was commissioned in November 2009 to investigate young people’s experience and perspectives on their disengagement from learning. This research would fill an evidence gap on personal accounts of disengagement from young people in Wales.
- 1.3. The **aim** of the research project was to: “Conduct a qualitative research study to explore young people’s (aged 11 to 16) perspectives on disengagement from learning.”
- 1.4. The **objectives** of the research project were to:
  - Engage with young people to participate in a small scale qualitative research study to explore their perspectives on their disengagement from learning.
  - Explore young people’s satisfaction with the teaching and learning they have received and identify the ‘triggers’ for young people who become disengaged from learning.

- Investigate the school and curriculum factors (including context and delivery of the curriculum and the classroom context) that most influence the route to disengagement.
  - Identify the impact of disengagement attitudes and behaviours on post-16 aspirations.
  - Provide empirical evidence for policy development and recommendations to inform future research linked to the One Wales enquiry.
- 1.5. The research was structured around a summary literature review on disengagement from school and fieldwork. The fieldwork focused on interviews with 47 young people aged 11-16 years old and on a small number of key stakeholder interviews. The intention was to use these interviews to enrich the existing research on disengagement through the narratives of young people in Wales.
- 1.6. The fieldwork with young people set out to provide an unmediated voice with no attempt to balance what was being said through contributions from the learning settings these young people attended. The aim was to present the experience as the young people describe it, with their interpretation of events and analysis of cause and effect. Clearly practitioners in learning settings would be able to add a different perspective on events and actions.
- 1.7. This report sets out the methodology undertaken (section two), the key outcomes of the literature review (section three) and summary findings from the 47 interviews with young people (section four). Finally the report identifies a set of conclusions from the research (section five).

## Section 2: Methodology

### Literature review

- 2.1. Introduction: In order to provide a context for the research, a review of relevant literature was undertaken. This was a scoping review, rather than a full rapid evidence assessment, and as such the sources and search terms were limited. A search protocol was agreed with the client, the Welsh Assembly Government, appropriate to the scope of the study and the time available.
- 2.2. Search protocol: It was agreed that the following websites would be searched:
- Current Education Research in the UK (CERUK);
  - The Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre database of education research (EPPI);
  - Department for Schools, Children and Families (DCSF);
  - The Scottish Executive; and
  - British Education Index (BEI).
- 2.3. It was agreed that each website would be searched using terms based upon the key themes reflected in the aims of the research (see table 2.1) <sup>1</sup>. Given the search's limited scope, certain terms, such as "curriculum", were not included as a specific search term, on the basis that an initial piloting suggested that issues linked to the curriculum would be picked up under other search terms such as "learning", "teaching" and "satisfaction". Therefore, as outlined in paragraph 2.7 they were used as search terms when documents were reviewed.

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the different way the BEI website works different terms had to be used for example "pupil motivation" and "educationally disadvantaged".

Table 2.1: Key themes and search terms	
Theme	Search terms
Qualitative research	Disengagement AND qualitative
Learner satisfaction	Disengagement AND satisfaction
Teaching and learning	Disengagement AND teaching
	Disengagement AND learning
Causes of disengagement (triggers)	Disengagement AND causes
Young people	Disengagement AND young people
Impact of disengagement upon future aspirations	Disengagement AND aspirations

2.4. It was further agreed that the search results should be narrowed to focus upon studies that:

- were conducted in the UK;
- focused upon the 11-16 age group;
- had been conducted within the last 10 years (from 1999 onwards);
- considered disengagement relating to educational issues; and,
- focused upon the accounts of young people<sup>2</sup>.

2.5. Given the tight timescale (six months), in the event that websites produce an unmanageable number of hits (50 or more), it was agreed that the PWU would:

- refine the results to include publications or documents only (depending upon the options offered by each website); and,
- limit the number of documents or publications by date (e.g. by only reviewing literature from the last five years).

2.6. In addition to literature identified through this review process, it was agreed that the study would also consider key Estyn publications.

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<sup>2</sup> Many reports were based upon a combination of evidence sources such as interviews with professional staff and young people; however, it was not always clear what evidence the reports based their findings upon, for example the professional adult staff, young people or both. Also there are some reports with relevant findings for this research, which did not include research on young people.

2.7. **Analysis:** All documents collected for the review were systematically searched using terms based upon the aims and objectives of the research. These included:

- Curriculum;
- Learning;
- Relationships;
- Skills;
- Teaching;
- Workload;
- Satisfaction; and
- Causes.

2.8. The information identified from these terms (or themes), which were relevant, were then collected and summarised. Also the content pages and executive summaries of reports were read to identify and summarise any other issues of interest to the study, which had not been identified.

### **Fieldwork – interviews with young people**

2.9 Introduction: As outlined in the introduction, the aim of the fieldwork was to enrich the existing research on disengagement through the narratives of young people in Wales. In order to do this, the literature review and interviews with key stakeholders were used to identify a series of themes or issues of potential interest to the study. These provided the basis for the development of topic guides. The topic guides were deliberately used flexibly and imaginatively by interviewers and, consequently, although some structured questions were asked such as age, schools attended and subjects studied, the interviews with young people were essentially open ended, focusing on descriptions of experiences rather than answering a set of pre-identified questions (Bryman, 2001). This methodology was informed by Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) approach, based upon

'foreshadowed problems', which are discussed in detail below (paragraphs 2.30-3.31).

2.10 The fieldwork itself was structured into two stages with two rounds of interviews with young people. The first round of interviews (n=18) was used to inform an interim report that was discussed with the project's steering group, and used to inform the second round of interviews (n=29), by, for example identifying additional issues for the research to explore. This also provided an opportunity to review progress and it was agreed that the second round of interviews:

- would include more young people who were severely disengaged and more females, drawn from a wider range of learning settings and;
- would seek information from young people about contact with careers services and the time of year interviewees were born

2.11 Defining disengagement: In order to identify different levels of young people's disengagement, and to enable the research to include a cross-section of young people at different levels of disengagement, the PWU drew upon research commissioned by the DCSF in England, Callanan et al's (2009), which identified three broad levels of disengagement (see boxed text). This model was used as it was derived from a significant recent study and allowed the research to test out the model in a Welsh context.



### **Levels of disengagement.**

**Underachieving but not disengaged:** “For some in this group, underachievement was the result of an event or crisis, including health problems, pregnancy or a bereavement... [and] were usually characterised by long periods of absence which in turn made it more difficult for them to complete coursework and learn the curriculum needed at KS4...For others in this group, underachievement was a more gradual process...These cases were usually characterised by continued good attendance and a positive attitude towards school, coupled with a gradual drop-off in attainment.”

**Moderate disengagement:** “Young people in this group showed signs of moderate disengagement...Indeed, all the young people in this group completed at least some KS4 courses, although their KS4 attainment varied. For young people that fell into this group, there was still some enjoyment of some aspect of school. For some this was being able to socialise with friends, while for others it was a specific teacher or subject... For this group, while the factors contributing to their disengagement could often be complex, they tended to be less severe than those with severe or complete disengagement. The presence of some protective factors also prevented them from becoming severely or completely disengaged.”

**Severe or complete disengagement:** “Those that severely or completely disengaged from school suffered a serious drop in their attainment and had multiple complex factors contributing to their disengagement. Some dropped out of the education system entirely and did not pass any KS4 courses... this group often had a range of complex and multifaceted factors contributing to their disengagement. Young people in this group had few positive things to say about school and it is this absence of protective factors against disengagement that...distinguishes them from young people with moderate disengagement.”

Adapted from Callanan, et al, 2009, pp. 34-36

- 2.12 Although it was agreed that the definitions were useful, at the inception phase it was noted that young people may have different perspectives on what constitutes and characterises disengagement. Therefore, during interviews, the interviewers explored young peoples' perspectives and understanding of educational disengagement.
- 2.13 Sampling young people: The relatively small number of young people (n=47) in the study and its qualitative nature limited the number of categories that could be used to stratify the sample to reflect different characteristics, such as the level of disengagement. It was therefore agreed that the PWU should focus upon moderately and severely disengaged young people. In addition, the nature of the young people concerned - disengaged young people - meant it might be difficult to gain access to exact numbers within any identified category. Therefore, rather than set rigid quotas, defining the numbers of young people in each category, it was agreed that the PWU would aim to include:
- a mix of young people from rural, urban and valleys areas; and,
  - a mix of young people across Key Stages 3 and 4.
- 2.14 Identifying and screening young people for inclusion: in order to access potential interviewees, the PWU identified a range of learning, youth work and community settings (see table 2.2) that were working with disengaged young people and that might be able to introduce the research team to young people who were willing to take part in the research.

Table 2.2. Settings for interviews with young people				
Name and location	Description	Age range of setting	Level of disengagement	Character of setting's catchment area
Forsythia Centre Gurnos, Merthyr Tydfil	Youth club	11-16	Moderate and Severe	Valleys
Mountain Ash Comprehensive School, Rhondda Cynon Taf	On site special unit.	11-16	Moderate and Severe	Valleys
Ysgol Bryn Elian, Conwy	On site special unit.	11-16	Moderate and Severe	Rural and urban mix
Changing tracks, Bridgend	Project aimed at supporting young people who are not in Education, Employment or Training and face barriers to learning.	13-16	Severe	Urban and valleys
School Focused Communities Glyncoch, Rhondda Cynon Taf	Project aimed at supporting young people through comprehensive schooling. Includes intensive support for young people who are disengaged from education.	11-14	Moderate/ severe	Valleys
Sylfaen, Gwynedd	Community development organisation with links to projects aimed at supporting young people.	14-16	Moderate	Rural and urban
EOTAS and ELIS Swansea	Working with vulnerable young people requiring support to remain in education, frequently due to attendance issues.	14-16	Moderate and severe	Urban
Ysgol Bro Ddyfi, Machynlleth	Secondary school	11-16	Moderate	Rural and urban
Abergavenny North Communities First	Youth project	11-16	Moderate and severe	Rural and urban
Butetown Pavilion	Youth club	11-16	Moderate and severe	Urban

2.15 In order to identify potential interviewees in each of these settings, staff were asked to identify young people suitable for inclusion in the study. They were provided with selection criteria (see table 2.3) and were asked to use their professional judgement to assess whether the young person's disengagement was primarily caused by educational factors or personal factors. This was intended to ensure that only those young people whose disengagement was judged to be primarily or significantly caused by educational issues were selected for inclusion.

Table 2.3. Criteria for selection		
Level of disengagement Indicators	Moderately disengaged	Severely or completely disengaged
Enjoying school	Mostly	No
Underachieving	Yes	Yes
Motivation	Poor	Minimal
Attendance	Sporadic	Very poor
Behaviour	Sometimes poor	Very poor

- 2.16 It was agreed that using cash incentives to encourage young people in schools to participate would be inappropriate, but that young people accessed within a community setting would be offered an incentive of £10 for participating in the study.
- 2.17 Interviews with young people: These focused upon 4 broad themes which were based upon the study's objectives:
- Satisfaction with teaching and learning;
  - The 'triggers' for young people who become disengaged;
  - School and curriculum factors; and,
  - The impact of disengagement attitudes and behaviours on post 16 aspirations.
- 2.18 The PWU used a range of techniques to stimulate descriptions and narratives with the interviewer taking notes. The three key tools used were a timeline, a ranking exercise on school experiences and a mapping exercise on the school environment.
- 2.19 Timeline: Young people were asked to talk the interviewer through a 'timeline' from their first memory of school to the current day. The timeline was on a sheet of A2 paper and as the young person talked the interviewer placed positive experiences and memories above a line running across the page and negative ones below, checking all the

time with the young person that the placement was correct. The research tools will be available on the Welsh Assembly Website.

- 2.20 Young people were encouraged to record both negative and positive events upon the timeline, such as suspension from school, bereavements, birthdays and achievements both within school and outside school. This provided some insight into whether, for example, school related issues impacting upon disengagement worsen during periods when negative external events are occurring and whether their disengagement was a gradual or crisis driven process.
- 2.21 Timelines also enabled researchers to explore levels of disengagement around certain events clustered upon the timelines. For example, if a young person experienced bereavement, difficulties with peers and issues with school during a fairly short timescale, the researcher could explore issues around behaviour, attendance and enjoyment of school around this time. This in turn could help identify whether the level of educational disengagement was particularly marked during this period and the extent to which the young person felt that there was a connection between the issues discussed and their disengagement. Timelines were also used to project forward to look at the expected impact of disengagement upon post-16 attitudes and behaviour.
- 2.22 Ranking: Having completed the timeline, young people were then shown an A2 sheet with five columns headed: agree strongly, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree and strongly disagree. They were then shown a sheet of stickers with statements on them drawn from comments young people had made in previous studies (e.g. Lloyd-Jones 2005) and grouped around the four themes (see table 2.4 and Annex 1 for full version). The young people were asked where they wanted to place the stickers when thinking about their primary school and, then, their secondary school.

### Example of Ranking sheet

Agree Strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
	My school felt warm	I felt frightened in school	I found the work difficult	The teachers were interested in me
			The school was helpful and supportive	

2.23 The ranking exercise was not intended to function as a survey but rather as a tool to stimulate narrative. So, for example, it provided the interviewer with the opportunity to ask why a sticker had been placed in one column for primary school and another for secondary school.

2.24 Young people had very different responses to the stickers with some taking the sheet and focusing on placing them all in columns themselves, others having them read out and directing the interviewer on where to put them (this was done especially where there may have been literacy problems) and others refusing to do the exercise at all and just discussing one or two of the issues being raised.

Table 2.4. Examples of factors for Ranking exercises			
Key themes (Note: Shaded comments are positive, unshaded comments are negative)			
Teaching and learning	School and curriculum factors	Triggers for disengagement	Impact of disengagement
The teachers praised me when I did well	My school taught me about my rights	My school felt warm	I found school interesting
I found the work difficult	I felt frightened in school	I felt safe in school and travelling to and from school	The school gave me advice and guidance when I needed it.
My teachers were unfair	The school was helpful and supportive	I enjoyed going to school	My family only came to school when I got into trouble

The teachers were interested in me	I cared about school	The teachers at my school didn't respect me	I felt uncomfortable at school
Staff at my school were friendly	I felt anxious and upset at school	I had no one in school I could talk to about my problems	I was humiliated at school
I had help with my work if I needed it	The school didn't care about me	I was bullied at school	

2.25 Mapping: The research used a generic map containing the areas found in most schools, for example classrooms, a canteen, toilets, a sports hall and school yard and grounds, and asked young people to indicate their comfort within each of these areas. Again this was primarily a tool to stimulate description of experiences, since it enabled interviewers to explore why young people felt uncomfortable in particular areas and probe whether this was related to their disengagement. For example, if a young person identified that they felt uncomfortable in the school yard as a result of bullying by peers, the interviewer could explore if this had contributed to their disengagement.

2.26 The mapping exercise also helped to indicate how disengaged pupils felt about the overall school experience, and whether they consistently identified issues related to a particular aspect of the school experience. A high proportion of young people were relatively dismissive of the exercise saying either that they hated all aspects of school, or that there was no part of the building or environment that they did not like because their problems were more about, for example, the curriculum or teachers. However, this exercise was useful with a small number who identified noisy areas or places where they felt vulnerable such as the school bus, as parts of the school they particularly disliked and were then encouraged to explain why.

2.27 Confidentiality and consent: Due to the small numbers of young people accessed within each setting the PWU, it was agreed that to protect confidentiality, individual settings could not be provided with individual

feedback from interviews with their young people. It was agreed, though, that the final report would be available to all settings and would reflect the findings from interviews with all 47 young people.

2.28 The aims and objectives of the study were carefully explained to the young people and the researcher checked that they were happy to take part. It was explained that they were contributing to the development of a better understanding of why some young people disengage from school. Disengagement was explained as disliking, failing to get on with or in, and/or not wanting to be in - and that their experiences would be collected with that of others and go into a report for the Welsh Assembly Government. They were told that they would not be identified by name in any material arising from the study. All names used in this report are fictional.

2.29 Analysing and interpreting the data: As outlined in the introduction, this was a qualitative study that sought to collect narrative material directly from young people to illustrate the experience of disengagement. The research set out to provide an unmediated voice with no attempt to balance what was being said through contributions from practitioners in the learning settings these young people attended or to add additional context when analysing the data. The aim was to present the experience as the young people described it, with their interpretation of events and analysis of cause and effect.

2.30 In order to analyse and make sense of the rich and varied accounts young people provided in the course of the fieldwork, the PWU adopted Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) approach, based upon 'foreshadowed problems', a development of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) work on grounded theory<sup>3</sup>. This approach involves the identification of issues and themes considered of likely interest or relevance to the

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<sup>3</sup> The approach is informed by Glaser and Strauss' (1967) work on grounded theory but in contrast to pure 'grounded research', Hammersley and Atkinson's approach involves the identification of. This helps ensure that researchers will have "open, but not empty minds" (Janesuck, 2000, p. 384).



study, which informs data collection, through, for example topic guides.

In this case, the four core themes were:

- Satisfaction with teaching and learning;
- The ‘triggers’ for young people who become disengaged;
- School and curriculum factors; and,
- The impact of disengagement attitudes and behaviours on post 16 aspirations.

2.31 The interviews were then transcribed and an analysis framework set up (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). The data, drawn from the young people’s narratives, was grouped and categorised to see the extent to which it supports or fits with the issues and themes that were identified (i.e. the “foreshadowed problems’). The issues and themes were then refined, added to, subdivided, combined, or discarded, in order to fit the data (rather than trying to fit the data to the theory, or the issues and themes that were identified before the fieldwork began). Table 2.5 gives some examples of fields used in the analysis.

Table 2.5 – analysis framework				
Characteristics	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4
Identifier	Subjects studied	Age when disengagement began	Primary attended	Response to learning
Gender	Choosing subjects	Stressors identified	Secondary attended	Plans and how formed
Locality	Good learning experiences	Contributing issues e.g. health	Programmes/ support experienced	Aim post-16
Age	Bad learning experiences			Success in learning to date
LAC				Careers advice
SEN				

- 2.32 The interview structure relied on young people identifying the interventions and events that were important to them and therefore the data collected could not serve as a critique of the impact of any particular programme or service. It is likely that some young people did not talk about all the support services that they have been offered because the interviewers rarely asked direct questions such as ‘Have you ever seen a learning coach?’. The tendency, therefore, was for the extreme responses, such as those interventions that young people experienced as having a very good or very poor effect, to be described.
- 2.33 The interviews present a range of responses to school and learning that is illustrative but which cannot be seen as representative of young people as a whole or even of those that are disengaged from learning. The small number of young people involved could not be expected to reflect the range of geographical, cultural and socio-economic variants within Wales. Neither can it be assumed that they will have experienced all of the variations in provision for young people. The research needs, therefore, to be viewed within the context of other work on disengagement from learning, which we review in the following section, adding richness and depth to this work and suggesting where there may be gaps in understanding or interpretation of cause and effect.

## **Section 3: Literature review**

### **Introduction to the literature review**

- 3.1. The resource constraints of this project meant that the approach to the literature review was not a full, comprehensive rapid evidence assessment (REA) of the subject matter. Although, as outlined in section 2, it applied the principles of a REA, searching for and reviewing literature in a systematic way (GSRU, 2007).
  
- 3.2. The search identified 90 studies of potential interest, of which 69 contained relevant information. A full list of relevant documents is included in the bibliography. However, when the full texts were reviewed, the amount of material based specifically on evidence gathered from young people was found to be relatively limited. Within the studies reviewed, most of the literature was based upon evidence gathered from interviews with teachers and other key stakeholders, rather than from interviews with young people. When evidence was provided about young people it was not always clear whose ‘voice’ the findings were based upon. A considerable amount of the literature was reporting on evaluations or research of or about specific pilots, meaning that the experiences of young people could be atypical and that in many cases, guidance or strategy documents referenced the same research papers.
  
- 3.3. This section summarises the relevant themes in the literature on young people’s disengagement. These ‘themes’ are grouped under each of the relevant search terms, such as “learning”, or the “curriculum”. However, there was often an overlap, when a theme in the literature related to two or more of the search terms. For example, young people’s engagement in work-related “learning” could also relate to widening the “curriculum”. Therefore, the literature highlighted under one theme may also be relevant for other themes.

## Curriculum

3.4. Curriculum was the most common theme within the review and provided the greatest number of relevant results. Most of the studies highlighted five broad themes in tackling disengagement. These included:

- providing a wider curriculum most notably vocational courses (Callanan et al, 2009; DCSF, 2005; Estyn, 2009, 2008b, 2005b; GTCfE, 2005; Lowden et al, 2009; Menter, 2007; OFSTED, 2007; Reed, 2005; Scottish Executive, 2002; SRP, 2004; The Scottish Government, 2007a);
- making the curriculum as relevant as possible, for example, in terms of the inclusion of skills associated with employability (Adams et al, 2009; Callanan et al, 2009; DCSF, 2009, 2008b, 2006; DfES, 2004; Estyn, 2009, 2008b, 2005a; OFSTED, 2005; Visser et al, 2005; Reed, 2005; The Scottish Government, 2007a)
- providing a flexible curriculum which could adapt to the needs of the young people, for example, in terms of learning content or the time young people can access the curriculum (DCSF, 2008c, 2008d; DfES, 2002; Estyn, 2005a, 2005b; GTCfE, 2005; OFSTED, 2008; Riley et al, 2006; Scottish Executive, 2006, 2002);
- providing a pupil centred curriculum by consulting with young people and catering for the specific needs for example to suit their learning styles or needs (OFSTED, 2008; Frankham et al, 2007; Hallam et al, 2004; Riddell, 2008; Riley et al, 2006; Teaching and Learning Research Brief, 2003) and
- using training providers outside the school such as further education colleges and work-based learning providers (Estyn, 2009, 2008d, 2005b; Griggs et al, 2008; Lowden et al, 2009; McCrane et al, 2009; OFSTED, 2008; Scottish Executive, 2006).

3.5. A minority of studies had different, sometimes contradictory conclusions, for example one study (Hall & Raffo, 2001) highlighted that using training providers outside the school could sometimes have

a detrimental effect on young people when they came back to the school as they were used to being treated differently in the other learning setting. Also some studies (DfES, 2002; Reed, 2005) highlighted the barriers to achieving a wider curriculum, for example in rural areas.

- 3.6. Other themes were also highlighted to a lesser extent. These included:
- the curriculum not being sufficiently challenging for young people (Estyn, 2008c; Pirrie et al, 2009; Visser et al, 2005);
  - securing qualifications at an early age (e.g. 14 years old) can motivate young people who are at risk of becoming disengaged to engage in education (Callanan et al, 2009; GTCfE, 2005) ;
  - the importance of ensuring equality of access to the curriculum and the wider curriculum to all young people whatever their circumstances (GTCfE, 2005; The Scottish Government, 2003);
  - the importance of an enjoyable curriculum for young people (DfES, 2004; OFSTED, 2008);
  - the curriculum is currently better suited for girls than boys (Biggart et al, 2003; Ross, 2009);
  - curriculum choice at year 9 is important because this represents a key turning point for young people (Callanan et al, 2009; Cooke & Barnes, 2010); and
  - the curriculum is only one possible factor in addressing disengagement and therefore has limited impact in addressing disengagement (Pirrie, 2009; Scottish Executive, 2006).
- 3.7. “Learning”: Two relatively common themes, which were highlighted in order to tackle disengagement were:
- providing an engaging learning style most notably using practical or interactive methods to improve the learning experience of young people (Callanan et al, 2009; GTCfE, 2005; Nardi & Steward, 2003; Riley et al, 2006; Scottish Executive, 2004; The Scottish Government, 2007a); and

- targeting learning interventions or support, for example, “one to one” tuition (Callanan et al, 2009; Estyn, 2005a; Goodman & Gregg, 2010; Scottish Executive, 2009, 2006).

3.8. There were many other themes, which were highlighted to a lesser extent and were very different in their nature. These included;

- young people expressing their boredom with their learning experience (Estyn, 2008b; Bigger, 2006; SRP, 2004);
- the importance of improving the learning environment at home of young people who were at risk of becoming disengaged (Goodman & Gregg, 2010; Hallam et al, 2004; Vulliamy & Webb, 2003)
- young people who have unidentified learning difficulties, which increases their risk of disengagement (Gillies & Robinson, 2010; Pirrie et al, 2009);
- the increased emphasis on independent learning from Key stage 3 to 4, which means some young people struggle to adapt, increasing their risk of disengagement (Callanan et al, 2009; Hallam et al, 2004);
- creating a positive learning environment where young people are not afraid to try and fail (NTRPC, 2006; Bigger, 2006);
- a lack of basic skills such as literacy, which means disengaged young people lack skills needed to learn (NTRPC, 2006; SRP, 2004);
- online learning can be used as a useful tool to re-engage young people (Becta ICT Research, 2003; Ross, 2009);
- it is harder to identify girls who disengage from learning than to identify boys (JRF, 2002);
- informal learning is valued by young people who are at risk or are disengaged from learning (Adams et al, 2009; Frankham et al, 2007);
- transition initiatives improve the learning experience of young people (Estyn, 2008c; Estyn, 2005a; Estyn, 2005b); and

- a focus on personal and social skills improves attitude to learning (DCSF, 2006; Estyn, 2009; Estyn, 2008d).

3.9. “Relationships”: The evidence from many studies (Callanan et al, 2009; Frankham et al, 2007; Hallam et al, 2004; Maguire, 2009; OFSTED, 2008; OFSTED, 2005; Reed, 2005; Riley et al, 2006; Ross, 2009; SRP, 2004; The Scottish Government, 2003) suggests that teacher support was important for young people, and studies also highlighted that the breakdown of relationship between teachers and young people was relatively common among disengaged young people. Therefore, studies advocated ways in which this relationship could be improved (Bigger, 2006; OFSTED, 2008; Reed, 2005; Riley et al, 2006; SRP, 2004), such as basing a relationship on mutual respect and understanding. Issues around the parents’ relationship with school and between young people and their peers were also common. Studies highlighted how it was important that schools engage with parents, for example through the use of family support (Callanan et al, 2009; Goodman & Gregg, 2010; GTCfE, 2005; Hallam et al, 2004; Scottish Executive, 2006; The Scottish Government, 2007a; Vulliamy & Webb, 2003). Studies also identified different aspects of the quality of relationship between young people, which influenced their behaviour (Callanan et al, 2009; DfES, 2002; Estyn, 2008b; Hall & Raffo, 2001; Hallam et al, 2004; Mooij, 1999; Pirrie et al, 2009; The Scottish Government, 2003). For example, negative “peer pressure” could encourage young people to attend school less, increasing their risk of disengagement.

3.10. Less common themes identified by the literature included:

- smaller class sizes improved relationship with teachers, by, for example, giving teachers more time to explain things, and hence the learning experience (GTCfE, 2005; Pirrie et al, 2009; The Scottish Government, 2003);

- the positive impact of young people developing positive relationships with adults, such as employers, outside of schools (Hall & Raffo, 2001; Scottish Executive, 2002; SRP, 2004);
- the positive impact of young people developing links with external public sector and voluntary sector organisations such as the police, and charities that work with young people (Adams et al, 2009; Griggs et al, 2008; Hallam et al, 2004; OFSTED, 2005);
- transition from Key stage 3 to Key stage 4, a time when many young people develop their own interests, and a change which could lead to disengagement to school (Callanan et al, 2009; Gaynor, 2007);
- high rates of pupil mobility between schools had a detrimental effect on their ability to build new relationships and increased the risk of disengagement (Reed, 2005; Ross, 2009);
- initiatives to improve young people's engagement in schools for example, school councils, buddying and mentoring schemes were beneficial (Bigger, 2006; NTRP, 2006; OFSTED, 200); and
- negative relationships between young people and their families has a detrimental effect on young peoples engagement in learning (Goodman & Gregg, 2010; GTCfE, 2005; Hallam et al, 2004).

## **Skills**

3.11. Developing the social, emotional, and behavioural skills of young people was a common theme within the literature (DCSF, 2009; DfES, 2002; Estyn, 2009, 2008d; Goodman & Gregg, 2010; GTCfE, 2005; Scottish Executive, 2009; SRP, 2004). Developing such skills is reported to have beneficial effects, such as reducing truancy amongst young people, and acquiring these skills is important in order to be able to access formal learning, and develop young people's confidence and motivation to learn. One study (Scottish Executive, 2004), identified the importance of delivering these skills on an on-going basis throughout the young person's learning experience.



3.12. Less common themes identified in the literature review included:

- behaviour management skills of teachers, which were very mixed between schools and which influenced the disengagement levels among young people in these schools (Callanan et al, 2009; Reed, 2005);
- recognising the wider skills of young people, for example, by accrediting key skills (GTCfE, 2005; Scottish Executive, 2006);
- developing basic skills of young people who are at risk of or who were disengaged (Estyn, 2005a; SRP, 2004; The Scottish Government, 2007a);
- an alternative curriculum equips young people with the skills they need to re-enter mainstream (DCSF, 2008a; Pirrie et al, 2010);
- the importance of developing parental skills of parents of young people who were at risk of or who were already disengaged (Goodman & Gregg, 2010; Hallam et al, 2004; Sutherland & Purdy, 2006); and
- making sure that young people understand the relevance of education in relation to their career ambitions (Estyn, 2008b; Maguire, 2009; Ross, 2009).

## **Teaching**

3.13. The use of different teaching techniques was a strong theme in the literature reviewed (Armour & Sandford, 2010; Becta ICT; Callanan et al, 2009; Estyn, 2008a, 2005b; GTCfE, 2005; Riley et al, 2006; The Scottish Government, 2007a). Most notably, innovative techniques such as using drama, had proved effective in tackling young people's disengagement. The quality of teaching methods and consistency in the quality of teaching methods was also found to be important (DCSF, 2008b; Estyn, 2008b, 2008c; Nardi & Steward, 2003; OFSTED, 2005; Reed, 2005; SRP, 2004; Steer, 2009).

3.14. Other themes which were highlighted to a lesser extent included:

- having teachers which could deal with pupil with different characters (e.g. rebellious, bright etc) (Aymer & Okitikpi, 2001; Frankham et al, 2007);
- teachers who lacked appropriate skills to deal with different needs and abilities of young people within classrooms (Estyn, 2008a; The Scottish Government, 2003);
- the role of teaching assistants and mentors is especially important in working with those who are at risk of becoming disengaged (Estyn, 2008d; Frankham et al, 2007; Riley et al, 2006);
- the value of targeted teaching support when young people fall behind in their work (e.g. one to one support) (Estyn, 2008a; Estyn, 2005a; Goodman & Gregg, 2010);
- young people respected certain teaching attributes, such as showing respect to young people and providing “clear boundaries”) (OFSTED, 2005; Reed, 2005; Riley et al, 2006);
- consulting young people in regard to their learning could be beneficial (Riley et al, 2006; T LRB, 2003);
- primary school teaching techniques were favoured by disengaged young people in comparison to traditional secondary school teaching techniques (Adams, et al, 2009; Estyn, 2008c) ; and
- low level disruption by young people in class makes it difficult for teachers to deliver lessons effectively (Estyn, 2005b; Scottish Executive, 2004).

## **Workload**

3.15. There were very few relevant studies, and those that were tended to focus on professional staff such as teachers and Education Welfare Officers struggling with workloads (DfES, 2004; Griggs et al, 2008; JRF, 2002; Reed, 2005; Scottish Executive, 2004), suggesting a knock-on negative effect on the young person’s quality of experience within school. In regard to young people, a small number of studies highlighted that young people found it difficult to complete homework due to their other interests or the greater demands of school work at

KS4. This could worsen the process of disengagement that may have been initiated by other factors (Callanan et al, 2009; Ross, 2009).

## **Satisfaction**

3.16. There were very few relevant studies related to young people's satisfaction. Those that did highlighted young people's satisfaction with a particular pilot initiative which aimed to help disengaged young people (these pilots typically used techniques highlighted previously such as vocational courses) (Menter, 2007; Pirrie et al, 2009; Scottish Executive, 2006). Individual studies also highlighted, for example, how young people who were struggling in school could become motivated by rewards systems (Jones & Knowles, 2005; OFSTED, 2008), and how some schools were not able act upon the wishes of young people (Boaler & Brown, 2000; The Scottish Government, 2003).

## **Causes**

3.17. Studies highlighted how it was important to target young people as they started to become disengaged in order to avoid a long-term problem with disengagement (GTCfE, 2005; OFSTED, 2008; Scottish Executive, 2009; The Scottish Government, 2007a). Other key themes emerged:

- The importance of a holistic approach to rectify problems of disengagement, which meant not only reforming traditional educational policies, but also social reforms (Bigger, 2006; Pirrie, 2009; Kendall & Kinder, 2005; Vulliamy & Webb, 2003);
- examples of how offsite provision managed by schools could reduce fixed term and permanent exclusions (Griggs et al, 2008; Reed, 2005);
- young people who avoid confrontation with staff are not being identified as disengaged (NTRPC, 2006; JRF, 2002);
- the range of individual and school level factors, such as percentage take-up of free school meals, which could influence overall

attendance rates (Biggart et al, 2003; Coles et al, 2002; Schagen et al, 2004);

- the lack of an effective systematic process to identify and help young people re-engage in educational provision (Estyn, 2008b; Griggs et al, 2008; Goodman & Gregg, 2010; SRP, 2004); and
- young people who were disengaged often had personal problems which needed to be overcome before they could or would re-engage effectively with education (GTCfE, 2005; Scottish Executive, 2002; Vulliamy & Webb, 2003).

## **Section 4: Findings from the research with Young People**

### **Introduction to research**

- 4.1 This section outlines findings from the research with young people. The findings are reported under three of the study's objectives:
- Explore young people's satisfaction with the teaching and learning they have received and identify the 'triggers' for young people who become disengaged from learning;
  - Investigate the school and curriculum factors (including context and delivery of the curriculum and the classroom context) that most influence the route to disengagement; and
  - Identify the impact of disengagement attitudes and behaviours on post-16 aspirations.
- 4.2 In order to articulate their voice, young people are either directly quoted or their comments and views are paraphrased, drawing upon interviewers' notes. In order to protect the anonymity of young people, their names and identifying features have been changed or removed.
- 4.3 Inevitably the young people's narratives describe events as they have experienced or understood them and that is how they are presented in this report, since it is the young person's views and experiences that the research aimed to capture. This approach has its limitations however. For example, a young person is unlikely to comment critically on what they know or have experienced in an area like, for example, teaching approaches or learning styles, if they do not know that things could be done differently.
- 4.4 Similarly young people may not comment on some interventions because they have forgotten about them or do not feel they were important. This means that while the analysis can comment with some confidence on what is considered important by the young people, there is less data on what is not considered important. The study did ask

some direct questions, for example, in the second round of interviews young people were asked about contact with careers advice.

## **Characteristics of participants**

4.5 As outlined in Table 4.14., 47 young people were interviewed between December 2009 and April 2010. Interviews were conducted in a range of learning settings (see Table 2.3) with 12 young people being interviewed in schools, 12 interviewed in Education Otherwise Than at School (EOTAS) settings or placements arranged by EOTAS settings, 19 interviewed in youth club or other community youth work settings and four interviewed in their homes.

4.6 As Table 4.2 shows the research involved interviews with

- 12 x 16 year olds
- 16 x 15 year olds
- 8 x 14 year olds
- 5 x 13 year olds
- 6 x 12 year olds

4.7 Seven of the young people interviewed were currently Looked After by the local authority.

4.8 Three of the young people identified that they were being treated for ADHD, one said he had Aspergers, one said he had been diagnosed as dyslexic in the primary school and provided with additional support but that this diagnosis was not accepted in his secondary school and three others said that they had had support from the special educational needs provision in school. Five young people identified health problems that had led to them missing a significant amount of schooling including diabetes, joint pain and hearing problems.

Table 4.1 Characteristics of interviewees					
Gender	Age	Curriculum		Character of the setting's catchment area	Level of Disengagement* (severe or moderate)
		Main stream	Alter native		
M	16	1		Valleys	S
F	16		1	Urban/rural	S
M	16		1	Urban/rural	S
M	16		1	Urban/rural	S
M	16		1	Urban	S
M	16		1	Urban	S
F	16		1	Urban	S
M	16		1	Urban/Valleys	S
M	16		1	Valleys	S
M	16		1	Valleys	S
F	16	1		Valleys	M
F	16		1	Valleys	S
M	15		1	Urban/valleys	S
F	15		1	Urban/valleys	S
M	15		1	Urban	S
M	15		1	Urban	S
M	15		1	Urban	S
M	15		1	Urban	S
M	15		1	Urban	S
F	15	1		Urban/rural	M
M	15		1	Urban/rural	S
F	15		1	Valleys	S
M	15	1		Rural	M
M	15	1		Rural	M
F	15	1		Urban/rural	M
F	15	1		Urban/rural	M
F	15		1	Urban/rural	S
M	15		1	Valleys	S
M	14	1		Rural	M
M	14		1	Valleys	M
M	14	1		Urban	M
M	14	1		Urban	M
M	14	1		Rural	M
M	14	1		Rural	M
F	14	1		Urban	S

F	14		1	Urban	S
F	13	1		Rural	M
F	13	1		Rural	M
M	13	1		Rural	M
F	13	1		Urban	M
M	13	1		Rural	M
M	12	1		Valleys	M
M	12	1		Valleys	M
F	12	1		Urban/ rural	M
F	12	1		Urban/rural	M
M	12	1		Urban/rural	M
M	12	1		Urban	M
30 M 17 F		24	23		24 Severely 23 Moderately

4.6 Most of those that were identified as severely disengaged were currently involved in some form of learning provision for at least part of the week, whether through a special unit within school offering a reduced curriculum outside mainstream classes, an EOTAS provision or a home tutor. Some were involved in a mix of provision, attending school for some lessons or days and EOTAS provision for others. Amongst those who were moderately disengaged aged 14 years and over, most were on some form of reduced curriculum.

4.7 As table 4.1 shows, half of the young people could be characterised as severely disengaged. These were, in the main, young people who were not attending mainstream classes and who would not be returning to class. Although most were now completely disengaged from school (a small number were following a severely reduced curriculum which involved attending school for periods of the week) the characteristics identified in Table 2.3 (the criteria for selection, such as their motivation, enjoyment and attendance) were not evident in their new learning environment. In most cases their attendance at some form of alternative provision, whether on the school site or elsewhere, was highly managed with them often being collected and taken home. Most



were actively engaged in some form of learning and many talked about enjoying their current experience, contrasting it with more negative reflections on school.

- 4.8 A sub-set of the sample were asked about the time of year they were born to identify if there was a pattern relating to birth dates late in the educational year. No pattern was found, although the group of young people asked was small.

### **Triggers for disengagement**

- 4.9 The study looked at the factors that appeared to contribute to a young person's disengagement from school. However, understanding the extent to which the experiences and issues described were triggers leading to disengagement and/or symptoms of that disengagement was not always straightforward. For example, a commonly raised contributory factor to disengagement was poor attendance and nearly all of the young people interviewed had been through at least one period of poor attendance at school. Some had barely attended for years. However, what caused that poor attendance to start was not clear. Furthermore, there were young people who rarely attended school who still described their school as a good place.
- 4.10 Whatever the reasons for poor attendance, interviewees did describe how missing school had an accumulative effect where the more that was missed, the harder it was to catch up, the further behind you fell and the less likely you were to feel successful in class, the more likely you were to create trouble and be sent out and so miss more.

“.. if you missed school, you were told to copy up, but weren't given extra help to understand what you were copying, no explanation of the work. It was then difficult to get on with the rest of work because you'd missed a chunk of understanding.”

“There were big classes, 30 of us, and by the time the teacher came over I’d have done something stupid. By year 8 I was in special classes and they were sending me home for half the day, so I’d miss English and then have to catch up.”

4.11 The most commonly cited issue that young people raised when describing what they disliked about school was teachers and teachers’ behaviour (10 interviewees). In addition: nine interviewees identified bullying as a problem for them; six identified missing periods of schooling because of ill health; five said that the work got too hard for them; four said that they have learning difficulties which meant they struggled to read; four said that they were bored; four said they got into fights which led to them getting into trouble and three others said that they had problems getting on with other pupils in the school. Others identified a dislike of noise and crowds (three) which meant that class size was problem for them.

4.12 It was not within the remit of this study to consider factors outside of school life which contributed to the young people’s disengagement and young people were not asked about home life or other out of school pressures. Nevertheless, it was clear when they talked about their experiences that a link between such triggers for disengagement as poor behaviour and attendance and events and trauma at home could be seen. The young people themselves were dismissive of these and tended to be very protective of their families and anxious to point out that the responsibility for poor attendance, for example, were theirs alone. It was common, however, when discussing the timeline to see deterioration in behaviour, for example, at the time when parents split up, a grandmother died or a father went to prison.

“I used to like going to school but when my parents split up then everything went wrong”

- 4.13 In some cases life experiences clearly made it almost impossible for a young person to focus on their education and their main effort was focused on more immediate day to day survival.

“I’ve been in about 8 foster homes in the past year; I don’t bother unpacking my suitcase now. The one I am in now is in [place name] (20 miles away from EOTAS attended)) and I’ve only been there a few days, but I’ve not been back since the weekend”

- 4.14 Finally, it should be noted that many of the young people interviewed described their experience more in terms of the school disengaging from them than them disengaging from the school. Others, however, were appreciative when it was clear to them that the school, or as they often saw it individual teachers within the school, did not give up on them. Even those whose attendance was very poor could be very positive about aspects of their school and appreciative of the efforts that were being made to help them. One interviewee, for example, had an attendance record of less than 60% but said that his school was a very good one. Kelly appreciated how many chances she had been given by the school and that they had not given up on her:

“They could have chucked me out of school but they given me another chance here”

## **Curriculum and choice**

- 4.15 The research found that the young people aged 15 years and over were involved in a wide variety of curriculum options, in terms of content, volume and delivery approach. In contrast, of those aged 14 years and under, only two were currently involved in any form of non-mainstream curriculum options: one 14 year old was on a reduced curriculum which meant attending school for part of the school day and working in a small group outside the classroom environment and another 14 year old was in an EOTAS provision. In addition, one 12

year old described having additional literacy teaching. All other young people aged 14 years and under were following the same curriculum as their year group peers. Half of the young people interviewed said that their problems with school had started in primary school and at least one was permanently excluded from his school in year 6, the last year of primary school (see John's case study) and another had attended a specialist support centre in from year 4 to 5. None of the young people aged under 14 years identified that they had had any choice in what they studied.

- 4.16 As identified above, those aged 15 years and over had a much more varied curriculum than younger pupils, but whilst there was a broad range of both subjects and learning settings experienced across this older cohort, within each setting the elements of choice available to the disengaged young person were frequently extremely narrow since they were limited to what the school could offer or what was available locally within the nearest EOTAS or PRU setting. There was evidence that the young people were not always involved in deciding what they could do. Phil, for example, at 16 years old was in an EOTAS provision but unclear why he was put on the courses he was doing.

“I was given a timetable, don't know why. I do retail on a Monday because the teacher put me on it – what do I want to do that for?”

“I loved engineering but couldn't stand the teacher – I got into a scuffle with him and was expelled from his lessons – I still want to do the subject, but they don't do it here (EOTAS provision).”

- 4.17 Only school learning settings were described as tackling both behaviour issues and enabling young people to maintain involvement in at least a reduced form of mainstream curriculum and the interviewees involved in this approach were very supportive of it, although in one case the young person thought the help had come too late to enable her to succeed in her GCSEs. A number of interviewees were critical of

what they saw as an assumption being made that because they were poorly behaved, or did not like school, they were not capable of gaining GCSE qualifications.

“I like maths and feel good about doing it but because I am in set 5 we only measure lines with a ruler all lesson. I can get things quickly but I’m stuck with the ‘thick’ people, so I get bored. Because I only go to school 2 days a week I’m doing loser end GCSE’s but I am capable of doing higher grades but I can’t because I am only going two days a week.”

- 4.18 There was evidence from young people of how their options choices in year 9 had helped to re-engage some of the moderately disengaged. Four young people who described themselves as rarely attending in years 8 and 9 said that they were getting better in year 10 because they were able to leave behind lessons they did not like. However, not all the young people felt they had made wise choices. Many appeared to have had little help in making options choices and most described choosing subjects because friends were, as Carrie explained:

“I was always good at art, I loved it, but my friends didn’t go so I didn’t”

- 4.19 Gavin described being ‘chucked out’ for six weeks in year nine, meaning that he missed the opportunity to make choices ‘so I got what was left’.

### **Curriculum relevance**

- 4.20 The young people were more likely to judge areas of the curriculum by how much they enjoyed the lessons than its direct relevance to them, although languages were the most likely to be criticised on both counts. Interviewees, especially males, were likely to comment on how hard it was to learn a language, the (poor) quality of the teaching, the dislike of

having to speak the language in class and the (lack of) relevance of learning both foreign languages and Welsh. Welsh most frequently came in for criticism around the way it was taught, since most did see the relevance of learning it. There were four examples of young people in EOTAS settings who had to ask workers what subjects they were studying and others that did not know what, if any, qualifications they were working towards in these settings. The relevance of the curriculum for them was that it was enjoyable.

- 4.21 As young people were coming towards the end of their school career most had thought about next steps and where they wanted to go. In some cases this had given added relevance to the curriculum. Ieuan, for example, said that his attendance had improved since he started his GCSEs and that he has 'wedi callio', become more sensible, largely due, he thinks, to his mother's influence. Sion kept saying he was 'on the right road now' after years of poor attendance and that he knew where he was going:

"the school is no help but I know I need GCSE's to get onto the building course"

- 4.22 For some in year 11 this realisation of the relevance of the curriculum had, they felt, come too late. Sam described how she wanted to be an air hostess but because she had missed so much school since year 8 she felt that even trying to get any GCSEs now was hopeless and that she had to start again in college.

### **Flexibility of curriculum**

- 4.23 As identified above, the accounts of young people showed little flexibility in the curriculum before the age of 14 or 15 years and after this point, whilst there was considerable variety in the curriculum that interviewees were following across the different learning settings, there were limitations on the extent to which much of it was about choice. 22

of the 28 interviewees aged 15 and 16 years were studying a significantly reduced (2 or 3 subjects only) or specialist curriculum (key skills and personal development programmes). Only six young people in this age group were studying five or more GCSEs.

- 4.24 There were significant variations in the curriculum interviewees were following across schools and counties, so that a young person in one area was accessing a vocational curriculum whilst another with a similar history at a different school was accessing a personal development curriculum only. There also appeared to be variations in the access to and level of basic skills support young people were receiving, from some who were getting intensive basic skills support even though they could read, to others who needed the support but got very little. Glyn, for example, at 16 cannot read and has very little help with this, whilst Ceri (see case study) has good literacy but is now doing key skills and basic maths when she had been in a higher grade GCSE maths class.

“I have had a problem from infants but I was given no support with English and maths in primary. At first I had no help with English and maths in the comp and then I got half an hour every two weeks. I couldn’t read.”

### **Pupil centred curriculum**

- 4.25 It was not always clear how pupil centred the curriculum interviewees were following was. The variety of different programmes that interviewees were on would suggest a flexibility to respond to pupils’ needs but, as identified above, in fact the only time interviewees described choosing what learning they were involved in was in relationship to subject options on a standard GCSE curriculum. The accounts of young people suggested that the steps that schools take to manage behaviour, or at least to mitigate the impact of bad behaviour

on other young people, had a greater impact in shaping the curriculum available to many of the interviewees than their individual needs.

“I found the top set easy but I’ve moved to bottom now because of my behaviour. There is a boy in my set in maths who is brilliant and should be in set 1, but because of his behaviour is not allowed to be in the top set.”

“I wanted to do Welsh, I need to do languages because I want to go on a mechanics course in x College where you work in Germany for a time, but they don’t do anything like that here (EOTAS provision)”

4.26 There were also examples of how the support interviewees were getting to catch up on basic skills deficits was cutting across the aspects of the curriculum they liked best:

“I have extra lessons for reading and maths but I don’t like missing art because I like drawing and I miss IT, and I hate that.” (year 7 pupil)

4.27 Six of the young people were studying a significantly reduced curriculum in school which involved them being in school for a shorter period each day and, in two cases, working outside the normal classroom environment when they are in school. Whilst there was evidence of the school, in these cases, going to considerable lengths to engage the young people there was less evidence of curriculum choice since all were studying the same core subjects.

### **An enjoyable curriculum**

4.28 Young people talked about aspects of the curriculum they really enjoyed. A small minority had never enjoyed anything about school and learning, but most had some examples of things they liked. Unsurprisingly young people were most likely to enjoy something they



felt able to do or were good at. However, they also often appreciated the challenges involved in programmes which take them out of the classroom and are delivered by other agencies. Interviewees also commented on enjoying classes where they can contribute (you can talk to him); where the approach is light (you can have a laugh with her); and where there is variety in what they were doing, that is trips, some practical work, breaks in routine. Young people gave examples of lessons where their interest had been engaged and they remembered the teacher's approach. Dai, for example, described how his head of year made school a laugh:

“he kept his word, would take us out, he taught English and made it fun – one time he put a pile of money on the desk and told us to make a bet and he would give us the money, a few times some of the boys got the question right and he gave them the money – kept his word.”

“the teacher is good, he corrects you if you're doing something wrong, but in a good way, no shouting or showing you up.”

4.29 A third of the young people talked about liking practical subjects such as art, construction courses, or personal development programmes better than book based work. Certainly part of it is that they describe themselves as being 'good' at these subjects, or at least able to do them; they receive praise from the teachers involved as a result and this is contrasted with other subjects where they feel less able or rewarded.

“I like... technology because you get to do something different every 4-6 weeks like IT, electronics, cooking, woodwork and you get to make things like speakers. Also you get different teachers every few

weeks, so if you don't like them or you're bored, you know they'll be gone in a few lessons."

"The best is (school run course for pupils at risk of disengagement) – because you got to go out, the class is small – only 12 and the teacher is a 'boi iawn', easy to talk to, funny, relaxed, will help you".

### **The limits of curriculum in addressing disengagement**

4.30 Many of the young people had, by year 9 when they would be making options choices, already seriously disengaged from learning. A few had disengaged from learning before they left the primary school. For these young people there were significant barriers to accessing a flexible curriculum even within a school that had a very wide curriculum offer. As identified in 4.7, the curriculum was not described as a factor in their disengagement and whilst, for some of the moderately disengaged, choice in year 10 helped to promote re-engagement for older pupils, the causes of disengagement described were more linked to social integration, emotional maturity and out of school events than subject choice. At least half of the severely disengaged older interviewees either could not read or had poor literacy skills and most had not resolved the significant social and emotional barriers that had impacted on their experience of school, in some cases right from early years.

4.31 31 of the 47 young people said that they planned, or expected, to go on to college after leaving school but in the judgment of interviewers, it would take a very flexible and responsive curriculum delivered in a highly supportive way to keep some of them there.

### **Teachers and teaching**

4.32 As identified in 4.9, teachers were the most commonly cited contributory factor for disengagement amongst the young people. A poor relationship with one teacher could have a disproportionate impact

in that young people described not attending school on the days they were due to meet that teacher, so missing other lessons on that day as well. Girls were more likely than boys to identify a specific issue, such as a teacher humiliating them in front of the class, which had caused damage.

- 4.33 The most common complaint about teaching was where it was described as 'boring'. Because half of the interviewees were in some form of alternative educational experience they were able to contrast the teaching/learning experience they were currently experiencing with that of their previous classroom experience. They appreciated the attention they received from tutors/teachers as a result of being in small groups; the flexibility and, frequently, informality of the delivery styles on offer; their comfort with the curriculum (none talked about it being hard or challenging in contrast to some school work); and the fact that the staff offered personal support. Many of the young people interviewed talked about valuing individual attention and evidence that teachers, tutors and support workers were interested in them.

"The PRU was so boring, we didn't do anything there, but the home tutor was the best because there was no shouting, just one to one talking. I learned much better doing English and reading that way."

- 4.34 Six of the young people talked about feeling that teachers had made up their minds about them (disengaged from them) before they even came to the school on the basis of a family reputation.

"The teachers told me I will never do anything, be on the dole, just like your brother"

"I know I behaved badly... but the teacher had made up his mind about me before that because he remembers my father and my uncle"

Teachers were also described as giving up on you if you were slow or difficult by a few young people:

“My reputation went ahead of me so I had a really bad experience at comp. My ADHD gave teachers an excuse not to listen to me.”

“..so I started behind in year 7 – there was no extra help and I could keep up as long as I got on with the teacher, but with the others I’d go home. It’s the teachers’ fault – one always called me Charlie Boy and that’s not my name”

“I didn’t know what to do and I couldn’t read. The teachers didn’t like me and I didn’t like them”

- 4.35 Young people described the importance of having a positive relationship with a teacher and some clearly craved that affirmation. When asked for a positive experience of school, for example, Alun remembered that once a teacher had told him he was bright and others described how they would change their behaviour to please, or just spend time with, a teacher they liked.

“If I like the teacher I’ll be good”

“I was way behind in the last year of primary and I used to go to the toilets or put my head on the desk, then the teacher would shout and send me to the head and that was the best bit, he’d give me a lollipop”

- 4.36 The characteristics of good teachers and support workers, as described by the young people, were kindness, reliability and consistency and calmness. Jake, for example, said he has an excellent YOT worker who calls on him and ‘drags me out of bed to do things’.

Jake really likes him and puts his improvements down to him being there all the time and not letting him down.

4.37 The young men in particular valued male teachers and it was clear that some had few positive male role models outside school. The chance to talk to an adult male about, for example, football and sports, was mentioned by a number of young men. In both negative and positive references to individual staff, male teachers, tutors and support workers were most likely to be mentioned.

4.38 In a couple of cases it was possible to see how relationships between young people and staff varied and how judgements on the curriculum and on teaching were coloured by a young person's response to the teacher involved. In one setting, for example, a young person described one subject as by far the best, because the teacher was really good and he really liked him. The next interviewee mentioned the same subject and how she disliked it because the (same) teacher was horrible. This example illustrates the difficulty of isolating the causal link between disengagement and teacher, teaching or subject. So, for example, a young person who finds a subject boring is more likely to be challenging to teach and the resulting conflict less likely to allow for a positive student/teacher relationship. Support workers and tutors working outside the mainstream classroom setting were more consistently viewed positively, with the small group size being seen as creating an opportunity to get to know them.

## **Learning**

4.39 In talking about whether they liked going to school nearly all the young people focused on relationships both with school staff and with their peers as being both the prime factor in enjoying school (all my mates are there) and in not enjoying it (I get picked on). However, when asked about why school was important, they rarely identified any purpose

other than qualifications and only one interviewee described how school helped develop social skills.

- 4.40 As noted above, classroom size and organisation emerged as an issue for learning primarily amongst the most severely disengaged. These young people, in particular, described finding large classes difficult and needing individual attention. Three of the severely disengaged young people said that they have never (from infants school) been able to cope with crowds and with noise and two others in this group said that they did not feel safe in school because of what they perceived as the lack of discipline. Both these young people described how they had been violent in the past and admitted to having bullied or attacked others, saying that they were not proud of what they had done but felt forced to behave this way in what they saw as a dangerous environment. Even where young people did not describe being afraid, they saw a lack of control in the classroom as a negative experience.

“Graphics is my worst lesson – it’s difficult, there’s no computer at home and you don’t get any help with the work. I miss a session at the beginning of the week because it clashes with another subject and struggle to understand the work because of this. The graphics class is a mixture of age groups, year 11 and older and the teacher doesn’t bother much, so I spend my time playing games”

- 4.41 There were a few early signs amongst the six youngest (year 7) interviewees of how they were starting to disengage as learners. All the year 7 pupils in this study had already shown signs of poor attendance, one had been in a specialist provision centre for year 4 and 5 and one was on medication for ADHD. The enthusiasm for learning was also waning. At least one, Abdul, could not read and the youth workers at his local youth club suspected he had some mild learning difficulty, but there was no indication that this was being addressed. He was already rarely attending school. Karen had been very happy in primary school

and said she loved maths and was one of the best in the school but had been severely knocked back by it being made clear to her, since coming to the secondary school, that she was not as bright as she had thought.

“I wanted to be a maths teacher in the juniors but I can’t. I’m not really intelligent because I need extra lessons and I am in the lowest groups for everything, they won’t give me a chance to be in the second group”

- 4.42 She says she has missed a lot of school this year because of tonsillitis and when the interviewer suggested these extra lessons may be to help her catch up, she said that she knew now she could not do the work and that she did not like maths anymore.

### **Peer relationships**

- 4.43 As seen from 4.9, nine interviewees identified issues around bullying as a key factor in their disengagement from school. In three or four of the cases there were complex issues where the interviewee was both bully and bullied. In two cases this became a very serious situation (see Ceri’s case study) which led to the young women withdrawing altogether from their education and, finally, in year 11, finding peace in a highly managed and controlled setting where they felt safe both from the behaviour of others and from losing control of their own behaviour.
- 4.44 As they describe them, the symptoms of poor peer relationships were obvious in both these cases from primary school, as it was in many other cases (see John’s case study). Issues around social and emotional development can also be seen in how interviewees talked about fighting (four interviewees said that they regularly got into fights throughout their schooling and others mentioned fighting) and their inability to control their moods.

4.45 The young women interviewed tended to talk about the pressure of relationships with other girls in school and how this influenced attendance and learning by either positively influencing them to truant (that is choosing to spend time with friends outside school); or negatively influencing truancy (such as the fear of being bullied or 'picked on' encouraging them not to go to school). Although they were aware that teachers often attributed poor behaviour or a change in attitude to work to peer group influences, they tended to be more ambivalent about it, perhaps seeing the friendships as a symptom of change, rather than its cause. Kate described starting secondary school in sets 1 and 2, but as the years have gone by she has slipped to sets 3 and 4. She said she was aware that the teachers felt this because she is friends with young people who are two to three years older than her and that the teachers worry these young people are a bad influence on her. However, Kate didn't feel that her decline should be attributed to them; she saw what was happening as being her own responsibility.

### **Moving around learning settings**

4.46 Eighteen of the interviewees had attended more than one primary school and some had attended four or five. All but one of the young people Looked After by a local authority had attended more than one primary school. All of the thirteen interviewees aged 15 and 16 years that had attended more than one primary school were now in some form of non-mainstream education provision. It was not always clear why the young people had moved schools. In at least one case an interviewee said it was because his mother kept on moving, and others talked about family moves.

4.47 At the other end of the scale, a few interviewees seemed reluctant to give up the security provided by membership of a school, even if they rarely attended it. Derek, for example, regretted not choosing an option



in construction trades but said that he got sick on the bus and so did not want to go to college.

### **Workload and difficulty**

- 4.48 Five interviewees described their biggest difficulty as being about the work becoming too hard for them. Two mentioned learning coaches but said that they had not been helpful. There were differences in how the young people identified this issue. At least five said that they were very intelligent and found school work 'easy' but that their attendance had been so bad that it was not worth them trying to catch up now. In these cases there was a sense that they would rather not try than be seen to fail something they believed themselves intellectually capable of doing. These young people had high but vulnerable self-esteem and they did not want to risk challenging it. Whether they also had high levels of self-efficacy, is more debatable. A second group did not have the basic building blocks to be able to tackle the curriculum. Some could not read at all and others said they had very poor literacy. The interviewees in year 7 illustrated how quickly these young people could fall behind in the work and how hard it was for them to keep up. A third group just did not see school and qualifications as important and so did not see making an effort as important. Jamie, for example, said that he was no good at exams, just could not do them. However, he also agreed that he had never tried to revise.
- 4.49 Interviewees identified that they were asked to do work that was too hard for them and 'switched off' whilst at the same time being asked to do work that was too easy and, similarly, 'switching off'. It was clear that some felt they were able to do high level work in one subject area, like maths, but needed much more basic level teaching in others, like English or Welsh. Their criticism was that a school or EOTAS may see their poor literacy, for example, as an indication of a generally poor skill level and fail to prioritise their involvement in subjects they could do well in.

## Chronic problems

4.50 Twenty four of the interviewees (over half) said that they had problems with school right from primary school and some of these had had severe problems including one that was permanently excluded in year 6 and one that attended an education support unit in years 4-5. Also, as noted above, eighteen of the interviewees had attended more than one primary school. Young people described behaviour at primary school which would have suggested they were struggling to adjust, including hitting teachers, violence to other children, attention seeking behaviour and avoiding others. Some described being given additional support in the primary school including one to one help from a teaching assistant, which disappeared when they went to the secondary school. John's case study provides a narrative of a child's total failure to engage with school, and the school 'system's' failure to cope with his extreme behaviour and provide him with an education.

### Case study: John

'From infants I was always playing up, showing off but also the teachers would accuse me of things, treat me differently to the others. The work was easy and I learn quick but my problem is that I cannot take a telling off, my temperature goes up and I flip. I was constantly playing up, I used to throw bricks at the teachers – and halfway through year 6 they just said don't come back. So I had no school for the rest of that year, didn't do nothing.'

John went to the comprehensive but before the end of year 7 was again excluded and was then sent to an EOTAS centre but was told to leave within a few months. He went back to the school but did, he said, nothing for two and a half years, rarely attending. He was then sent to a pupil referral unit:

'The PRU was full of idiots and we didn't do no work, just boys showing off. It was not a good place to be. I went for 5 months then I got thrown out.'

He was sent back to the EOTAS provider but was again excluded after a while:

'There was a lot of work there on English and maths but it was OK. I got on with two of the teachers but there was one who had it in for me, was sending me home every day. In the end I got strung up by 2 teachers, one gripped me by the throat. I had to leave then... He shouldn't have done it, but then I shouldn't have said what I said. He was wrong but so was I.'

During his second stay at the EOTAS provision John did have anger management support but, he said, it was too late, he had needed it in the juniors.

'I could never cope with big classes, I flip when I hear teachers shouting, even if they are not shouting at me, I can't cope with it.'

For the last three months John has been working (illegally since he is still under school leaving age). After he was thrown out of the EOTAS provision he asked the owner of a café he uses if he could work in the kitchen. The owner agreed to a day a week and this has gradually increased to 6 days. He explained that he loved work. Asked why he was able to cope there when he could never handle school he said it was a calm place and when asked how a busy kitchen could be described as calm he said that although there was pressure to get work done, the boss never shouted, always explained things clearly and if he got it wrong would show him again calmly. If customers were rude he knew he could not respond because he wanted to keep his job and would tell the boss because, he said, the boss would treat him fairly (that is, believe him). He wants to stay in work and says he is good at cooking and feels good about being allowed to use the till 'you have to be honest, it means he trusts you'. His boss has told him that if he can keep going, he will take him on as a proper trainee and send him to college, so 'I will be paid to go to college'.

It is not certain that John will make it to college – he describes himself as being on a final warning with police and says that if he does anything bad he will go to prison. John was on a current ban from the youth club he was interviewed in (he was let in for the interview) because he had deliberately smashed a door in anger the week before. However, the youth worker in charge was very positive about him and after he was paid £10 for this interview he went straight to see her and gave the money towards mending the door.

John's problems with anger and coping with the classroom environment were evident from his earliest school years and his description of his behaviour makes it clear why he was never able to be taught effectively in class. All his positive memories of school relate to the rare chances he had to form a relationship – such as with the head teacher of his junior school. He has been consistently aggressive and disruptive and has emerged with little or no education. However, he describes himself as a quick learner and can read. The longest period of uninterrupted learning for over ten years has been achieved through his own actions in finding a job and, whilst there is no guarantee that he will not be de-railed at any point, he has proved that, at least at this point in his life, he can learn, he can 'take telling' as long as the telling is credible to him and done in a calm way, and that he can control his anger when the stakes are high enough.

#### Case Study: Ceri

Ceri says that she has been bullied throughout her school career. Six weeks ago she had, at 15 years old, been enrolled with an EOTAS provision that was for three hours a day and, she said, was happy for the first time in her school career. There are four girls in her group and she has made friends with all of them and with Phil, the tutor. She says she is the only one in the group who has not been 'kicked out' of school and that she is going for medical reasons, since her unhappiness in school had become so severe that she

was suicidal, twice attempting to kill herself. Her doctor had told her 'never go back to that school' because she had become 'mentally unstable'.

Ceri is clear that the schools she has attended have been to blame for all her problems because they did not protect her from bullies. In passing she acknowledges trauma at home, such as her Nan dying in year 8 'I went totally off it then' and her sister running away from home with an older man 'I couldn't believe she would leave me like that' but says that school made her life worse at every stage.

Ceri described a range of strategies she had developed in primary school to control the bullying including always taking packed lunches so she could eat in the toilet in a locked cubicle, keeping herself apart from other children as far as possible and beating up the boys involved outside school. She said that the school knew what was happening but did not help at all and that it had been exactly the same for her older sister. Her father, she said, had done what he could to make the school respond, including attacking the head teacher, pinning him up against a cabinet. But the story she tells is complex, with many anomalies. She also describes herself as doing well in school, having good friends, having fun in what she thought of as a good primary school.

She also says that she was happy with the move to secondary school and remembers year 7 as a good year and says she had even stopped her sister being bullied by attacking the key culprit on the bus with an iron bar. She said her sister had been appalled but she had explained that she did it out of love, she could not see her sister unhappy. By the end of the year, though, people were 'picking' on her again and this got worse throughout years 8 (around the time her Nan died), 9 and 10. Although the school knew, she says they did not help and seemed to think that she was the bully. She admitted that she had a short temper and was 'easy to wind up' and so did attack others some times. She started to select days when she would attend by the lessons she liked, so she enjoyed maths and chemistry but found English hard and would check

her timetable so that if there were only one or two lessons she liked she would not go in.

The school arranged for her to see a counsellor every two weeks but the counsellor left in year 9 and she said that the new one discussed her with the teachers despite having signed a confidentiality agreement, so she stopped going. Again her father had been angry with the school and she saw his aggression as protective. She said that the deputy head was afraid of her father because he remembered having taught him.

Ceri says she was in GCSE classes in school and was sorry that the EOTAS provision she was now in had no science option, she was doing key skills only, but was looking forward to going to college next September to study childcare or hair and beauty and had an aim of going into the army to be a nurse, mechanic or chef. She said she did not need to see a Careers Officer since she could discuss her plans with her family.

4.51 Even where young people's school experiences were less extreme than those of John and Ceri there were many examples of them missing a period of schooling because of health or accidents, poor attendance or exclusions and no programme being in place to enable them to catch up with the work they missed before going back into the classroom.

### **Impact on young people's aspirations**

4.52 The interviewees were asked what they wanted to do in the future. There was a reasonable range of ideas for future jobs. What was clear, however, was that although almost all of the young people interviewed believe that it was important to get qualifications to help them achieve their aspirations, there was no evidence of linkage between their current situation and behaviour and the expectations of a future job. So, for example, young people who were clear that they were not going to gain any GCSE (or equivalent) qualifications still aspired to a job that would require academic qualifications and young people who already

had a criminal record for violence aspired to work with children, not seeing (or perhaps knowing) the implications of their record.

4.53 31 of the interviewees, expected to continue their education into further education college. This, and the positive response to the alternative education provision, suggest that they were less disengaged from education than they were from school. In fact, some appeared to have put their education on 'hold', expecting no qualifications from completing their compulsory education years, and expecting to start again properly once they got to college. However, there was little awareness of the demands of a college course and while the strengths of the small groups and limited curriculum that the twenty-three in EOTAS, PRU or school support programmes were involved in had succeeded in re-engaging them in learning, it was not clear how prepared they would be for mainstream college courses.

4.54 Lyn's account provides a good illustration of these themes. She had been moderately disengaged in school and has already started a college course and was still attending six months later. However, she did not know what qualification she was doing and when asked what would happen next she said that the college would give them some tests and if they passed enough would see if they could do a job and would then get them a job. She was, at best, a passive participant in college who had not yet started to take responsibility for her own learning. While she was content to continue attending college, there were other interviewees, such as Ceri (see case study) who would need a far more active engagement strategy if they were to move successfully from the intensively supported environment they were currently in back to a classroom environment at college.

4.55 Less than half of the 15 and 16 year olds (thirteen of twenty-eight) said that they had seen a careers officer. Some said that they did not need to because they had decided what to do, others said that they were

taking the advice of family. Those that had seen a careers officer said, generally, that they had been helpful in completing application forms for college.



## **Section 5: Conclusions & Policy Implications**

### **Introduction**

5.1. This section of the report draws on the evidence provided by the research to identify key findings and the policy implications of these. The data generated by the interviews with young people largely backs up the findings of the literature review and both stress the importance of understanding the complexity of needs amongst young people who are disengaging from school. The causes of disengagement are rarely simple ones and frequently involve a cumulative mix of factors linked to personal social and emotional development, life events, school, child and family coping strategies and attitudes to learning.

5.2. In many ways the key issues to emerge were less about what events caused or exacerbated disengagement but why those events, experiences or problems, which affect many children and young people, cause some to disengage. Lots of young people experience family break-up, health problems and unsympathetic teachers and still maintain an effective relationship with their school. Why one young person should have a lower capacity than others to cope with school, with relationships or with bereavements, and particularly why statistically the outcomes of that lower capacity in terms of lack of qualifications is associated with poverty and social disadvantage, is an issue that needs to be both more clearly understood and, as a result, more effectively tackled.

5.3. The young people's stories captured in this report illustrate the complexity of disengagement from school. However, they also show the benefits of a range of approaches to re-engage young people in learning. Few of the young people were irrevocably disengaged from learning and most were responding very positively to the steps that were being taken to help them. However, for many these steps were coming too late to ensure they complete their period of compulsory schooling with a good standard of education. The research showed the importance

of responses to the complex needs of young people that are coherent and timely. In this section we outline the key elements of such a coherent and planned response as identified from the research. They focus on stopping young people becoming disengaged in the first place and on how to re-engage them.

## **Addressing chronic needs**

- 5.4. The young people interviewed included some who had never coped well with the school experience. As they talked through their school careers these young people illustrated how they exhibited the same set of problems in each of the schools they attended. It was clear from their stories that the symptoms of their difficulties, such as challenging behaviour, were recognised soon after they started school and at various points steps had been taken, such as referrals to specialist provision. However, what was also clear was that the steps taken had not been able to make a sustainable difference or, crucially, ensure that the child involved was able to engage with, and benefit from, school.
- 5.5. There was some evidence from the young people that these chronic problems are seen by teachers as running across generations and siblings. Young people talked about being seen by teachers as sharing the characteristics of their parents or other family members.

### **Implications and recommendations**

- The research suggests that for some of the young people the causes of their disengagement are rooted in problems that precede enrolment in schools and that links with early intervention work with families is vital in helping schools identify and plan for support needed.
- The research suggests the need for consistent and evidence based strategies for tackling the barriers to engaging in learning, including building social and emotional skills and focusing on building capacity rather than responding to crises. The CYPP and local

authority are important here in ensuring that such strategies are built around the child, rather than the learning setting, and are monitored on a consistent basis.

- Bullying emerged as both a symptom and cause of disengagement. Further research into patterns of persistent bullying and its links to the social and emotional skills of both bullied and bully would be helpful in exploring how this issue can be tackled more effectively.

### **The importance of maintaining progress and keeping up**

5.6. The young people's stories illustrated how for some there is a process of disengagement that can start with a relatively minor issue. In particular the research shows the damage that can be done when lessons are missed and when events or behaviour issues interfere with school and education. All of the young people in the research had missed lessons, whether because of truancy, accidents and ill-health, disciplinary actions (such as exclusions or being 'sent out') or from attending non-mainstream courses, such as additional basic skills support. None described any process or programme to ensure that they could catch up on missed work and it was clear that a young person who was struggling in school any way should not be relied upon to take the initiative to find ways to catch up.

5.7. The cumulative effect of missing work is important since the young people talked of feeling increasingly alienated from class work they could not understand, which, in turn, stimulated behaviour that could lead to further missed work through being sent out or through 'switching off' and passively disengaging. The response to persistent lessons missed appeared to be either to leave the young person on a downward slide or, in some cases, to cut back involvement to a reduced curriculum.

#### **Implications and recommendations**

- There was evidence that curriculum choice and flexibility may help to tackle self-exclusion from lessons but that for some it may be

offered too late (that is, from year 10) to prevent severe disengagement from occurring.

- Good teaching helps and there was evidence of young people selectively attending well taught (engaging) classes.
- Positive school-family links can help to identify potential problems that can disrupt school attendance. In most cases this may involve the school taking low level, proactive steps such as ensuring there is a quiet opportunity for someone to take a child aside and listen<sup>4</sup> but more comprehensive strategies could be planned where staff know that the child or young person involved does not cope well with such problems.
- School disciplinary action needs to include strategies to minimise negative educational impact. So, for example, if a young person is excluded from one or more lessons, consideration is given to how to compensate for the work missed.

## **Support to re-engage**

5.8. The interviews illustrated how, as young people grow up, their attitudes and ambitions change and they can be supported to re-engage with learning. Some were re-engaged by options choices and the prospect of progression to college, others responded positively to EOTAS provision where they worked in small groups and could build an effective relationship with the tutor/support worker and others were in work place settings where they were able to learn through a one-to-one relationship with an adult. The challenge for education at this point is how to compensate for the learning lost and help these young people gain a realistic chance of success.

## **Implications and recommendations**

- There is a need for more nuanced and flexible strategies to enable young people to make a new start in learning at each stage of their education.

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<sup>4</sup> Sian described how they were told in primary school that if they had a problem they could talk to a teacher but, she said, nobody ever did so she felt stupid asking and didn't talk to anyone.

- Whilst many of the young people interviewed had poor basic skills, not all did and even those that did would not be attracted to a return to the classroom environment they failed in, and the English/Welsh and maths provision they hated. Embedding basic skills into learning programmes that mean something to them is likely to be more successful.
- The research illustrated a need for greater guidance and support for these young people at the point of making options choices.
- The research found that curriculum choice for the severely disengaged is very limited within individual settings. There is a need for research to gather the evidence on what curriculum and delivery styles are having the greatest impact in engaging and/or re-engaging young people in learning and the extent to which these approaches are successfully preparing the young people for progression and transition.
- The research showed that teachers and tutors can be a key factor in young people disengaging from learning and also in facilitating re-engagement. This suggests that staff who work with these young people need, themselves, to have effective social, emotional and behavioural skills. In particular, those working in PRUs and EOTAS settings need the skills that enable them to work with a group of very challenging young people.
- The capacity of further education colleges and training programmes to re-engage young people in learning is vital. Evidence from the research suggests that there may be a need to continue to provide young people who have experienced specialised provision such as EOTAS with a high level of support as they make the transition to college courses to ensure that they are able to sustain their involvement.

### **Areas where further research may be required**

5.10. This study has some striking findings, but because the aim was to capture an unmediated voice from young people and no attempt was made to balance young people's accounts with those of practitioners and because the sample of young people involved was both small and purposefully selected, we cannot assume that the findings are

representative of the experiences of other young people who are moderately or severely disengaged. Therefore, there may be a case for further research to explore whether this study's findings in relation to the following are representative:

- The wide variation in the curriculum offered and the approach and support in different learning settings working with disengaged young people (see paragraphs 4.15-4.17);
- The impact of poor social and emotional skills upon young people's ability to cope with school (paragraph 4.30) and to manage relationships (paragraphs 4.44-4.45);
- The quality and/or appropriateness of basic skills provision (see paragraph 4.49);
- The frequency and impact of school moves amongst young people who are disengaged from learning (see paragraph 4.46);
- The extent to which interventions are coordinated, so that chronic problems are effectively addressed (see paragraph 4.50) and strategies being used to enable young people who miss periods of education to catch up (see paragraph 4.51);
- The impact of Learning Pathways 14-19 upon many disengaged young people's desire to continue in further education, and their preparedness for coping with the demands of further education (see paragraph 4.53);
- The mismatch between many young people's aspirations and their knowledge of what would be required to realise them (see paragraph 4.52); and
- The extent to which current careers advice and guidance is impacting on young people who are disengaged, or at risk of disengaging, from school (see paragraph 4.55).

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