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Pupil, Teacher and Parent views on secondary education in an economically deprived former coal mining town in the UK

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Sheffield Hallam University

**Pupil, Teacher and Parent views on secondary
education in an economically deprived former
coal mining town in the UK**

**Paper presented at the AERA annual meeting,
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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss views of pupils, parents and teachers in a deprived area, Coalton, in the North of England. Funding to regenerate the area was used to improve educational attainment, and as part of the work to assess its success a large scale, longitudinal survey was conducted. In this paper, views of 12 year olds on transfer to secondary school and views of 16 year olds on leaving school, as well as views of their parents and teachers, are presented. In addition, we examine differences in attitudes to school between the 12 year olds and 16 year olds. We conclude that pupil attitudes appear to deteriorate throughout the years of secondary education, and that projects aiming to tackle this problem should be supported. We briefly report on one such project in Coalton.

Background to the research

As part of the evaluation of a UK government funded initiative to regenerate more deprived areas, a research team from Sheffield Hallam University is undertaking a 5 year longitudinal survey of two groups of pupils (cohort size: 1000) aged 5 and 12 (baseline year 1998), in Coalton¹, an English former mining town. In this paper, we concentrate on the study of 12-year-olds (in Year 7), making comparisons between these baseline results, and those of a cross-sectional study of 16-year-olds (in Year 11). We look at the findings from the Year 7 survey into pupils' views on the transition to secondary school², and from the Year 11 survey into pupils' views on leaving school. We also make use of findings from interviews with teachers and parents.

The central government funding for regeneration projects – the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) - aims to develop new employment opportunities and to improve educational provision for all age groups with the overall aim of “improving the attitudes in the community, particularly amongst the young towards education and training, to raise levels of attainment and improve prospects of employment.” To try to meet this rather all-encompassing aim, a regeneration project – “Highway to Success” – was developed in Coalton. The educational element of this programme was based around seven themes, five of which (making a good start in school, family learning, key curriculum skills, transitions in school and leaving school or college) impact directly on pre-school and school age children. The projects funded as part of

¹ The town and its schools studied in this project have been given pseudonyms

the programme varied in size and scope, but they had the shared aim of improving attainment in schools which has been a top government priority since the Labour party took office in 1998.

Ambitious targets for raising the attainment of school pupils have been set at national, local district and at school level, with national attainment testing at age 5,7,11,14 and 16 years now established. All schools are subject to monitoring by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) and schools that are not making adequate progress towards raising standards receive additional support (and in some instances are closed). The Blair Labour administration has funded many other strategies also designed to raise levels of achievement, some of which were initiated by the previous Conservative administration. These include: literacy hours, numeracy hours, establishing study support centres and homework clubs, beacon schools, schemes for the gifted and talented in cities and specialist school status for technology, sport, and arts. These initiatives are taking place simultaneously with the specific projects funded by regeneration budgets which means that it will be difficult to establish with certainty how each contributes to the raising of achievement. Hence the need to be able to monitor changes in attitudes towards education over time.

Research Questions

Our Key question in the study is: What are the differences in attitudes to school and education between 12 and 16 year olds in this school district?

The paper also addresses three sub questions:

- How do children manage the transition from primary (elementary) school to secondary school in this Local Education Authority (LEA)?
- What are children's views on the transition from school at 16?
- How do parents and teachers understand these issues?

We examined the differences in attitudes in the context of British writings on pupils' attitudes to, and their views on schools (Woods, 1990, Rudduck et al, 1996), and key works on pupil disaffection of young people. Hodgson (1999, p19) identifies a number of factors from current research studies that are linked to disaffection,

² The vast majority of pupils in the UK move from primary school to secondary school between Year 6 and Year 7

including social class (Willis, 1977, Ball, 1981), gender (Abraham, 1995, Hayton, 1999) and ethnicity (Gillborn and Gipps, 1996, Demack et al, 2000). Systemic factors identified include school selection procedures and competition between schools (Gewirtz et al, 1995) curriculum issues and pupil grouping arrangements (Berends, 1995, Boaler, 1997). Pupil grouping (a factor not noted by Hodgson) has also contributed to the growing gap between high and low achievers in schools (Pearce and Hillman, 1998).

Since these are two cross-sectional samples, the results should be treated with care. Clearly, the differences we find at this stage between results from the 12 year old cohort and the 16 year old cohort do not tell us about changes in attitudes of the 12 year old cohort. The aim is primarily to help gather data for theory building, predictions for longitudinal results and comparisons with the literature. In fact, these findings do indicate the trends that appear to take place in attitudes to school of young people over time (the findings are supported by other studies, including the few longitudinal ones that have taken place in the UK – see the next section).

The aim is, in the longer term, to attempt to link the attitudinal findings to academic achievement data. If we examine standard measures of achievement over recent years, it can be seen that Coalton appears to have been improving at faster than the national average, but Coalton's academic achievement levels remain well below the English national average (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: GCSE³ attainment in Coalton and in England 1997-2000

	1997	1998	1999	2000	Change 1997- 2000
% of Coalton pupils attaining 5 or more A*-C grade GCSEs	28.6	29.8	32.4	34.9	-
Percentage points change (year on year)		1.2	2.6	2.5	6.3
Percentage change (year on year)		4.2	8.7	7.7	22.0
% of pupils in England attaining 5 or more A*-C grade GCSEs	43.3	44.6	46.6	47.4	-
Percentage points change		1.3	2.0	0.8	4.1
Percentage change (year on year)		3.0	4.5	1.7	9.5

³ see glossary. Percentage of pupils attaining 5 or more A*-C grade GCSEs is the standard measure of attainment at 16 in England

English measures of achievement have been recently challenged on the grounds of accuracy and validity, since the UK Government controls the testing authorities (and is in a position to determine pass rates and grades. For example, in the Year 7 SATs tests, the majority of the markers (2000) are teachers of that age range and have access to questions two months in advance of the tests. The consistency of the marking (particularly in English) has been the subject of much debate in schools and there have been examples of disclosure of unfair practices in the conduct of tests.

Despite these reservations about national test results the research team decided to look for relationships between age 11 test results in 1998 and the survey responses. This matching will also be done when the age 12 cohorts' test results are known at age 14 and 16. An assumption behind the funding of regeneration projects and of the educational performance standards movement being followed by the present government is that higher test scores in education will lead to a more highly skilled and productive workforce. Evidence from the USA (Levin, 1998) indicates that there is at best only weak evidence for this claim.

Methodology

The five-year longitudinal study uses a combination of two methodologies. The first, the longitudinal aspect, involved a baseline survey in March 1998 of around 1000 children from 25 primary schools in their Reception Year and around 1000 children from the 14 secondary schools within the LEA in Year 7. These children will be surveyed again in 2002. Qualitative work, in the form of in-depth interviews with parents and focus groups with teachers, complements these surveys. This is an unusual methodology, particularly within the context of British educational research on pupil views. Table 2 over the page shows the structure of the data collection:

Table 2: Schedule for data collection in the Highway to Success evaluation

March 1998	March 99	March 00	March 2001	March 2002	March 2003
LONGITUDINAL SURVEYS					
COHORT ONE Age 5 Reception Parents (S) Parents (Q) Teachers (F)	Age 6	Age 7 SATs	Age 8 Year 3 Parents (Q) Teachers (F)	Age 9 Year 4 Parents (S)	Age 10
COHORT TWO Age 12 Year 7 Pupils (S) Parents (Q) Teachers (F)	Age 13	Age 14 SATs	Age 15 Year 10 Pupils (S) Employers (F)	Age 16 Year 11 Pupils (S) Employers (F)	Age 17
CROSS SECTIONAL SURVEYS					
Age 16 Year 11 Pupils (S) Parents (Q) Employers (F)			Age 5 Reception Parents (S) Parents (Q) Teachers (F)	Age 12 Year 7 Pupils (S) Parents (Q) Teachers (F)	

Notes

- (S) Denotes Statistical Study
- (Q) Denotes Qualitative Study
- (F) Denotes Focus Groups
- Midyear dates are given i.e. March 1998 spans the period Sept 1997 to August 1998
- The areas of darker shading represent the key areas of transition and the main SATs points.
- The Y11 year corresponds to what is denoted as age 16. This is the year in which a pupil becomes 16
- SATs are National Tests in English, Mathematics and Science

The main survey sample (1000 pupils aged 12 and 16, 1000 parents of 5 year olds) was obtained in two ways.

The sample of parents for the age 5 survey was found by using a database of parents provided by the LEA, and interviews were obtained by selecting every second name on it. This produced a representative random sample.

The sample of 12 and 16 year olds was obtained by asking all secondary schools to provide a mixed ability group of pupils. Each school was given a target number of pupils, based on the number of pupils on the school roll. It was hoped that the participation of all Coalton secondary schools and the mixed ability grouping would allow a natural cross-section of socio-economic groups. This was a compromise between randomness and practicality. However there were problems: one school

could not provide a Year 11 sample because it was so close to the leaving date, and some schools were over and under sampled.

There were further difficulties. The proposed teacher focus groups failed to attract support from teachers: we received only a handful of positive responses. Possible reasons for this include:

- Teachers' lack of awareness of the Highway to Success projects: *We are looking at funding for this from the TEC [Training and Enterprise Council], also the New Opportunities Fund [NOF] as well as SRB.* (Coalton teacher).
- Coalton as a 'research laboratory'. The town of Coalton has secured funding for a broad range initiatives in the areas of urban regeneration as well as education. Teachers feel that they are involved in a vast range of new initiatives. One school we worked with is involved in SRB projects, an Education Action Zone and a variety of Department for Education (DfEE) projects (among other initiatives). Small wonder that teachers from this school were unwilling to take up more time with interviews and focus groups.
- There was a further issue of a 'work to rule' directive given to teachers by their trade unions which did not include co-operation with researchers collecting data. Headteachers would not release teachers during the school day and teachers were generally not prepared to come to a focus group after school.

Individual teacher interviews were tried as an alternative method of data collection. These were time consuming, but the response rate was very high, and interviews were carried out with 20 teachers in twelve of the fourteen Coalton secondary schools. This had several advantages:

- Contacts were made with teachers at various levels of the hierarchy from careers teachers and teachers with pastoral responsibility to Deputy Headteachers and Headteachers.
- Understanding of the local environment. Teachers had opinions on aspects of local environment, such as the relatively poor performance of boys and the so-called 'Coalton culture'. This tells us as much about teachers' attitudes as about what is actually going on, but this is also valuable in understanding Coalton.

The research team is aware of the advantages of cohort studies over cross sectional designs (Douglas, 1976) and the weaknesses in longitudinal designs, particularly attrition. We are also aware that the five year study will allow greater opportunities for researchers to observe trends and to distinguish real changes from chance (Bailey, 1978). In the UK, this is one of the few longitudinal studies focusing on young people at secondary school. Blatchford (1996) conducted one such study in the 80s and 90s, and a nationally representative sample of 1000 young people has been tracked since 1991 as part of the British Household Panel Survey (Scales and Taplin, 2001). A number of shorter evaluative research projects are being undertaken in the Coalton district schools concurrently with our longitudinal study which are assessing the impact of taster vocational courses linked to the Further Education College, how Key Skills are being developed through work experience and alternative curriculum experiences for disaffected 15 and 16 year old pupils. These parallel studies are helping the research team to understand the changes experienced by the age 12 cohort as they proceed through the secondary schools.

Preliminary findings

Differences in attitudes between 12 and 16 year olds

There are some differences between the two samples. The Year 7 survey had 1035 responses, in keeping with the sample design except for over-representation of Parkway Grammar School (175, compared with the sample target of 120) and under-representation of two schools (Downton High school – 70, compared with the target 100, and Hallmount school – 42, not 70). The Year 11 survey had 766 responses, with most schools slightly under-represented compared with the target, although none were substantially under-represented, except for two schools which did not respond at all (Weatherford school and Portreach school). Other than this, the samples were similar. These slight differences should be borne in mind when looking at the comparisons, but the effects should not be great.

Our study indicates that older children have far less positive attitudes to school in general, and aspects of the curriculum in particular. In addition, boys are less positive than girls. (This is consistent with other research in this field e.g. Keys and Fernandez, 1993; Blatchford, 1996). An example of this is the differing attitudes to particular school subjects. Children were asked whether they enjoyed particular school subjects. The results are shown in Figures 1 and 2 below.

Figure 1: % of girls who indicated that they enjoyed each of the compulsory subjects

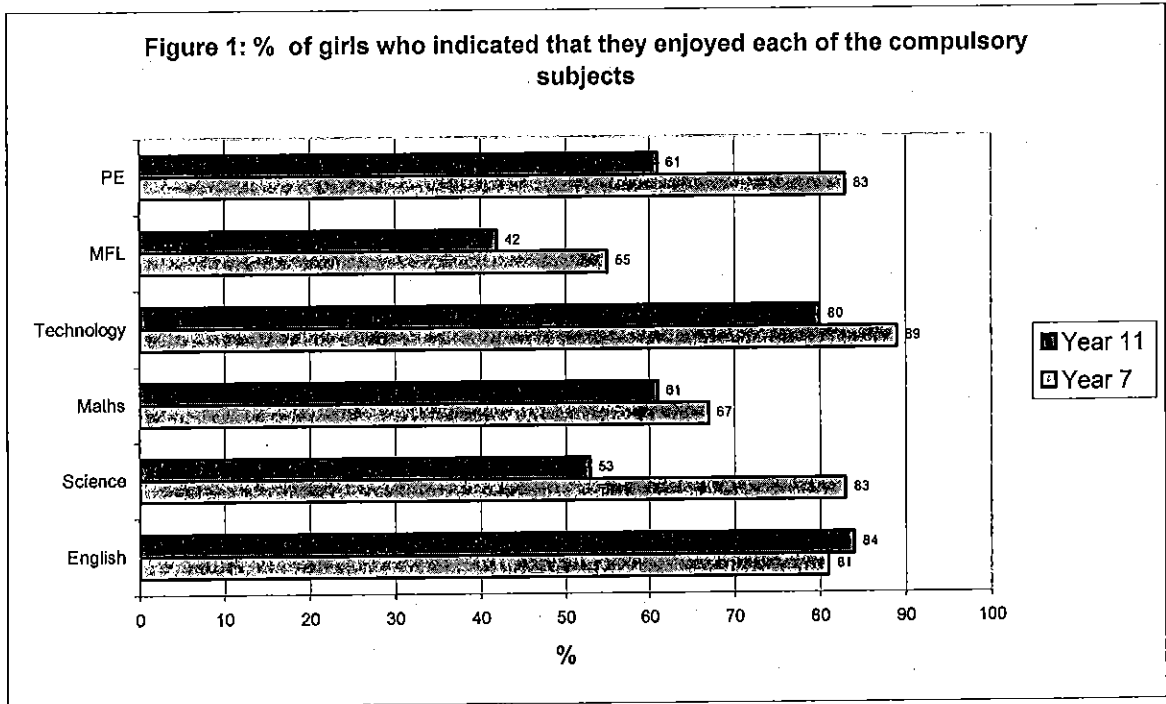
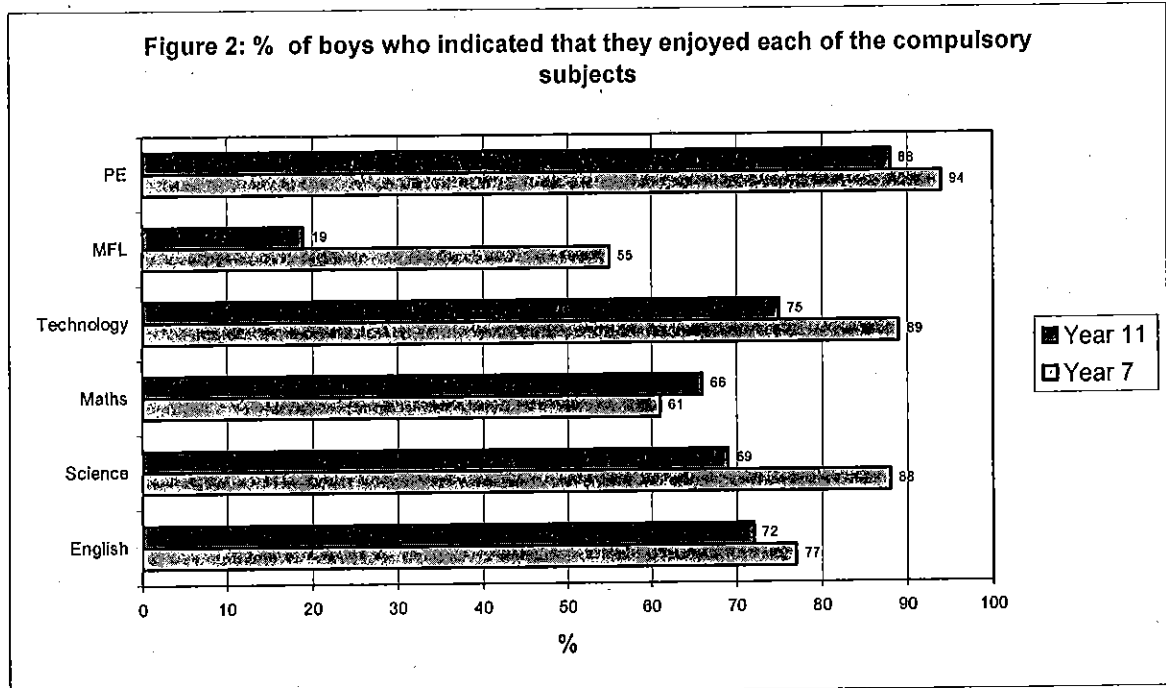


Figure 2: % of boys who indicated that they enjoyed each of the compulsory subjects



Every compulsory subject was less popular with 16 year old boys than with 12 year old boys, with the exception of Mathematics. The same was true of girls with the exception of English. Some subjects were dramatically different; for example, modern languages (MFL) was popular with 55% of both 12 year old boys and 12 year old girls. However just 19% of 16 year old boys and 42% of girls enjoyed modern

languages. Some subjects fared better; Physical education was popular with both 12 year old boys (94%) and 16 year olds (88%). Differences in enjoyment of the core subjects of English and Mathematics were slight, whereas Science was far less popular with 16 year olds of both sexes.

These findings are broadly consistent with the published research in the field (e.g. Whitehead 1996, Thomas 1990), although, in common with Francis (2000), we find that Mathematics is more popular among older girls than in these previous studies. The popularity of technology amongst girls appears to be higher than in other studies, although it must be borne in mind that 'technology' includes both traditionally 'masculine' subjects (e.g. resistant materials, electronics) and traditionally 'feminine' subjects (e.g. textiles, food technology).

There were also major differences between pupils' interest in and understanding of schoolwork, homework and their relationships with teachers:

	Boys			Girls			Overall		
	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.
Interesting	20	9	-11	28	14	-14	24	11	-13
OK	69	64	-5	65	75	+10	67	69	+2
Boring	11	27	+16	7	11	+4	9	20	+11

Boys in both year groups tend to be less positive about their schoolwork, but for both boys and girls the level of interest is markedly lower in Year 11 than in Year 7. There were differences in the amount of time spent on homework:

	Boys			Girls			Overall		
	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.
< ½ hour	27	33	+6	16	15	-1	22	25	+3
½ -1 hour	42	31	-11	46	24	-12	44	28	-16
1-1½ hours	19	25	+6	20	25	+5	20	25	+5
1½-2 hours	9	6	-3	10	19	+9	10	12	+2
> 2 hours	3	6	+3	7	17	+10	5	11	+6

Overall, pupils spend more time on homework in Year 11, although this finding masks gender differences. Girls clearly spend more time on homework in Year 11, although for the boys the trend is more difficult to make out. There were also some differences in level of understanding of homework:

	Boys			girls			Overall		
	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.
Always	15	22	+7	17	15	-2	16	18	+2
Mostly	64	62	-2	67	75	+8	68	65	-3
Sometimes	18	13	-5	14	8	-6	11	16	+5
Never	3	4	+1	3	2	-1	4	3	-1

In Year 11, girls are more likely to understand their homework most of the time, whereas there again there is no obvious pattern for the boys. In terms of interest in homework, there were more obvious differences:

	Boys			girls			Overall		
	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.
Interesting	10	4	-6	14	4	-10	12	4	-8
OK	63	44	-19	72	67	-5	67	55	-12
Boring	27	52	+25	14	29	+15	21	41	+20

The level of interest amongst boys and girls is much lower in Year 11. The difference is largest amongst boys, despite their finding homework substantially less interesting than girls even in Year 7 (these findings tally with those of other comparable UK studies such as Keys and Fernandez, 1993, Barber, 1994 and Blatchford, 1996; and studies specifically looking at gender and attitudes to school e.g. Harris et al, 1993; Warrington et al, 2000). There are also differences in punctuality with homework:

	Boys			Girls			Overall		
	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.	Year 7	Year 11	Diff.
Usually	70	58	-12	81	68	-13	75	62	-13
Sometimes	25	34	+9	17	28	+11	21	31	+10
Hardly ever	5	8	+3	2	4	+2	4	7	+3

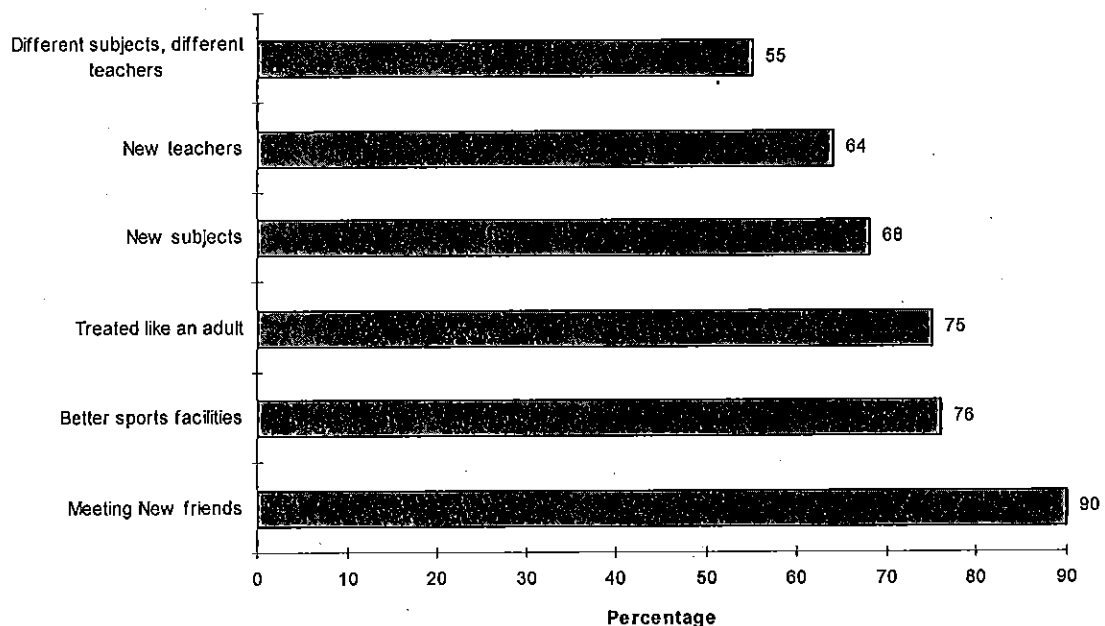
Punctuality was worse amongst boys and girls in Year 11. The difference in terms of percentage points is around the same for both boys and girls, although boys were much less punctual in Year 7 (and therefore remained so in Year 11).

Attitudes of 12 year olds to the transition to secondary school

Pupil responses

In this section, we look at some of the findings with regards to the attitudes of pupils, parents and teachers to their transition to secondary school. Some of the questions refer to their thoughts before they arrived in school, so these answers must be treated with caution. Pupils were asked first of all what they had looked forward to before coming to secondary school. The results are shown in Figure 3.

Figure: 3 What Pupils were Looking Forward to at their New School



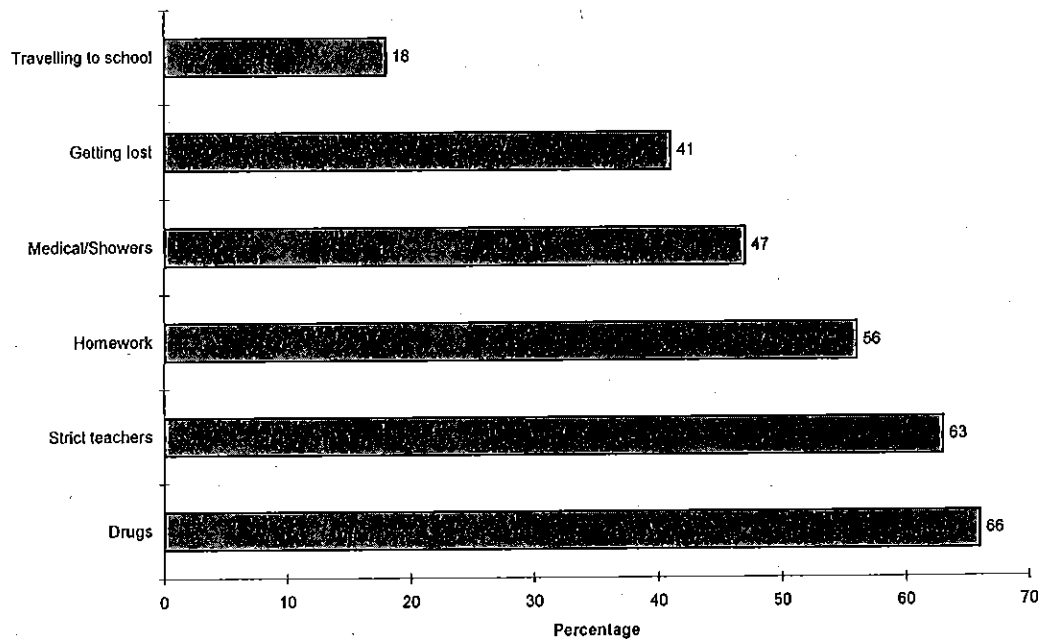
It is clear from our study that knowing someone else in the school was associated with pupils' attitudes to secondary school prior to arrival. Pupils who already knew someone at the school at their point of transition were more likely to report that they were looking forward to the new experiences, friends and facilities at the new school. This can be illustrated by referring to pupils who had either an older sibling or friend at the school.

Pupils who had an older brother or sister at the new school were more likely to report that they were looking forward to making new friends (94% of those with older siblings compared to 87% of those without). They were also looking forward to having new teachers (68% of those with an older sibling compared to 62% of those without) and being treated more like an adult (80% compared to 72% of those without an older sibling).

Similarly, those pupils who had an older friend already at school were more likely to report that they were looking forward to making new friends (93% of those with an older friend and 79% of those without an older friend), studying new subjects (71% of those with an older friend and 59% of those without an older friend), having new teachers (66% of those with an older friend and 59% of those without an older friend) and being treated more like an adult (79% of those with an older friend and 65% of those without an older friend).

Figure 4 shows the responses when asked what they had worried about prior to arrival at secondary school:

Figure 4: Pupils' Worries About Their New School



Pupils with an older brother or sister at the school were more worried about strict teachers than pupils without an older sibling (67% compared to 60% of pupils without an older sibling). Pupils with an older friend were also more likely to say that they were worried about coursework or homework (59% of those with an older friend compared to 46% of those without an older friend), strict teachers (66% of those with an older friend and 54% of those without an older friend), coming into contact with drugs (68% of those with an older friend and 59% of those without an older friend), and the school medical or taking showers (51% of those with an older friend and 36% of those without an older friend).

Taken as a whole, these results indicate that young people with prior knowledge of school via older friends or siblings feel more confident about many aspects of the transition. Yet this prior knowledge also gave the young people different worries.

Parents' comments

Of the parents interviewed, around a quarter said that their children had outgrown primary school and were looking forward, in general terms, to moving on. Parents were looking forward to their children developing social skills and having a wider range of activities at their disposal.

Although parents' views may not be accurate reflections of the child's worries and may in fact be their own concerns, a number of 'worries' came up time and time again. These were in two categories: rumours about initiation rites, bullying etc. and 'practical' worries about the size of the school; remembering when and where lessons were; being less than confident in terms of the number of new people; changing teachers; and doing new subjects. These concerns appear to tally with the results in the previous section.

There was some considerable concern expressed regarding how schools dealt with the issue of bullying in secondary schools. One parent approached the primary school hoping that they would calm the child's fears, but that the school did not take this seriously. The parent felt that irrespective of the truth, the rumours should be taken seriously and countered by teachers as it was causing distress to the children. Another parent said, *There was a very aggressive attitude at [the school] and a lot of bullying. The children daren't say anything because of retribution, and the school doesn't do anything about it.*

In general terms parents reported that their children had settled in well and made friends. One parent praised a school's initiative of setting up 'friendship groups' which ensured that children attended lessons with children they knew.

Teachers' comments

The survey report suggests that children with older siblings or friends are looking forward more to coming to school, but are more worried about things like bullying. Some of the teachers did think that those with elder siblings were more confident. One commented that *"there is a sense of reassurance about having someone to look after them"*. Another noted that *"parents are more confident as well. They are less worried about coping with big changes associated with the secondary school transfer"*. However, the majority of interviewees did not think there was a difference.

Several teachers made the point that all pupils were worried about bullying. One said *"In October the school talks to parents and pupils interested in coming here, and bullying always comes up."* Schools invested a lot of time and effort into reassuring parents. Some teachers reported that pupils often got told about fictitious 'initiation rites' such as being thrown down grass banking or worse: *"every year pupils think they will get their heads put down the toilets – we have to convince them that it doesn't happen!"*

Liaison between schools was mentioned by several teachers – "there is a focus on inter-school liaison... it has improved dramatically, and it is now commonplace for children and staff to see me in Primary schools now" said one. This took several forms. Most teachers talked about visits to the secondary school, and several also discussed work within primary schools: *"after Easter, some staff go into primary schools to teach taster lessons"*.

Some of the teachers emphasised the importance of form groups, and how this could be used to aid induction. For example, one Head of Lower School said "I ask the schools for friendship groups of two or three that I try to put in the same group. And I ask for an academic performance grade, information on children with SEN [special educational needs] or EBP [emotional and behavioural difficulties] and thumbnail character sketches to help me set up groups".

Attitudes of 16 year olds to leaving school

In this section, we look at some responses of the 16 year olds and their parents and teachers to questions regarding their future after leaving school. It is worth noting at this point that almost all youngsters in Coalton leave school at 16, since just one of the 14 secondary schools in the area allows pupils to stay on to take further qualifications. Almost all other youngsters who wish to stay in education in Coalton attend a local Further Education (FE) college in the town, Coalton College.

1. going to college or university

Pupil responses

Forty one per cent of pupils were considering studying at a University. Girls were more likely to be planning to go to University than the boys (46% of girls and only 38% of the boys). Pupils from non-manual backgrounds were much more likely to be considering going to University than other pupils. For example, of pupils whose fathers had a professional occupation, 64% planned to go to University compared to only 30% of plant or machine operators' children. Unsurprisingly, the staying on rate amongst pupils who were planning to go to University was much higher and ran at 87%.

The choice of what to do on leaving school was most likely to be influenced by parents/carers (45%), followed by the Careers Service (31%), teachers or a school careers lesson (28%), friends (16%), a work experience placement (16%) and lastly by family members other than parents/carers (11%). Twenty four per cent of pupils reported another 'miscellaneous' influence on their decision as to what to do next year.

Gender differences emerged between the influences upon this choice. In particular girls were more likely to be influenced by their parents/carers (51% compared to only 41% of boys), their teachers or a school careers lesson (36% compared to only 22% of boys), the careers service (36% compared to 27% of boys) and friends (21% compared to 12% of boys). Boys on the other hand were more likely to report an 'other' influence (30% compared to only 17% of girls). This clearly merits further investigation.

Pupils who were planning to go to University were much more likely to be influenced by parents/carers (55% of those going to University and only 40% of those not going), teachers or a school careers lessons (38% of those going to University compared to 21% who were not), the Careers Service (39% of those going to University compared to 26% who were not), friends (22% compared to 12% who were not) but were less influenced by their work placement than were pupils who were not going to University (11% compared to 18%).

Parents' Comments

The parents reported that although a majority had discussed both subjects taken at GCSE and plans for the future, they felt their role was one of guidance. Overall, although they felt they had a relatively small influence – only two parents had no idea what exams their children had taken – 13 said that they had made joint decisions with their children. Only three said they felt the decision had been taken by the child, the parent and the school and four said that the decision had been the child's. Interestingly, several parents said that timetabling difficulties and whether or not the child liked individual teachers had had as greater influence as any other factors.

Teachers' Comments

When asked about links into Higher Education (HE)⁴, some teachers thought the idea of targeting pupils for HE in Year 10 was *"jumping the gun"* in the words of one: *"they may be targeting the wrong group; perhaps FE to HE links might be better"*. Another interviewee explained:

"The school [does not allow pupils to stay on until 18], and without that we tend not to push what happens after 18 – it seems a long way away. But having said that, there are lots of prospectuses around. This kind of work is a lot more important at college – it has a part to play, but the school is so busy getting the pupils prepared for FE, that it takes second place."

One teacher in a school that had a high take-up of Higher Education thought that raising aspirations was difficult in some schools:

⁴ see glossary for definitions of HE and FE

"There is an atmosphere at the school of aspiring to go on to HE, which encourages all the children to think about it, even those whose parents would not have thought this a possibility. This is the true value of being a comprehensive school, with pupils from all abilities and backgrounds.."

Another common theme was the value of good links with Coalton College. On the whole, teachers were very impressed with the work of College link tutors. One teacher's comments were particularly positive:

The pupils often see the Coalton College person; they can see him at break or during some lessons, to talk about what is on offer at the college or to ask him to find out some information for them.

These links were thought to have improved the take up of FE by some of the teachers, although opinion was divided. One said that her *"gut feeling is that it has not made much difference. But it does give them enthusiasm for keeping training, but not necessarily in College. So it does support Lifelong Learning."*

Another teacher was more circumspect:

"There does seem to be more pupils seeking FE places now. This could be a positive thing – seeking to improve qualifications – or it could be negative – because there are not the jobs there to go to."

2. Careers Advice

Pupil responses

It is clearly important for pupils to be given advice by their schools and teachers for the future so that they are prepared for and know how to go about applying for jobs and the different (education & training) options available to them. Over two thirds of pupils reported that they had had some sort of advice on applying for jobs. A breakdown of what help they have been given is presented in Table 8. As can be seen, advice on what qualifications to take for particular jobs and what job to do were the most frequently cited form of careers advice. Least common was advice on having a job interview.

Table 8: Careers Advice Pupils have Received at School

Type of advice	Percentage who have received
The qualifications needed for different jobs	92
What job to do	88
Further study to do	88
Writing a job application	75
Writing a CV	72
Having a job interview	65

Of those pupils who had received the above forms of advice, the majority found them to be useful. Over 80% of pupils who had received any type of advice reported that it had been useful.

Parents' comments

Specific criticisms included that the Careers advice came far too late (2 parents); that it was only useful for those that knew already what they wanted to do (2 parents, although this is contradicted in one of the following quotes); two parents were apparently completely unaware of any links between schools and further education colleges and four parents stated in strong terms that their children had been written off as failures before they'd even had any advice. Parents' comments were mixed as the following selection indicates:

There were tasters between Coalton College and the school, but it didn't give enough info about the lessons, the curriculum, teaching methods and the like. It wasn't specialised enough for each student. They just got them together in groups -- it was rubbish.

The careers advice was excellent. Many of the teachers were very good, very approachable, although there were a few problems in some specific areas. I always get the feeling that the whole system is hit and miss. There are a lot of teachers coming and going and they all have different standards.

It's very difficult for parent's to give careers advice. If [she] decided to pack it in at [work], we would be behind her – we told her when she started that the very least she would find out would be that she liked it or hated it. It's not as black and white as some people say. She did get some careers guidance at school, but she told them what she wanted and the guidance teacher wasn't much help, as he didn't know how to help.

Three parents said that the school's careers advice had been good and one praised the school's helpfulness in helping their child to apply to Coalton College. Further, the range of activities parents were aware of was good. In addition to the above, they mentioned – unprompted – weekly visits by the College, presentations by the college, open days, link tutors, careers days and talks by local firms.

Discussion and conclusions

The comparison of Year 7 and Year 11 findings paints a picture familiar to researchers working in the UK, showing a pattern where children get progressively disenchanted with school throughout the course of their secondary education. The pupils appear to become less positive about most key curriculum subjects, less interested in schoolwork and homework and less likely to hand work in on time. Before arriving in Year 7, pupils are looking forward to making new friends, new subjects and new teachers (amongst other things), despite having some worries about drugs, homework and strict teachers. Their parents see their children settling down, despite worries about bullying, which their teachers try to dispel. In Year 11, a minority of young people (mainly those from professional backgrounds) were looking forward to going to University. Parents felt they had some say in this, whilst teachers on the whole reported concentrating on getting pupils into further education rather than higher education. Careers help was not viewed positively by parents. The results appear to show young people becoming less engaged with school, with low aspirations for the future. In this concluding section we examine some of the possible explanations for the increasing disaffection of young people in secondary schools, and the strategies that, if the increase in attainment is real and linked to attitudes to school, appear to be beginning to make a difference.

British theorists (Lacey, 1967; Hargreaves, 1970; Ball, 1981; Abraham, 1995) have argued in the past that social and educational differentiation (e.g. separating children

by ability into different 'streams' – equivalent to 'tracks' in the USA - or even into different schools) has led to a polarisation of youngsters. The setting of pupils within subjects of the National Curriculum is now more or less universal in secondary schools in the UK as it is seen by headteachers as being necessary to maximise measurable achievement. The achievement measures (SATs tests and GCSE) are themselves banded into different levels of difficulty and teachers select children for the appropriate test. Differentiation-polarisation theory DPT (Hammersley, 1985 provides a good overview) hypothesises that groups who see the broad benefits of education (those in the more academic tracks, who tend to be in higher social classes) stay positive over time whereas those in less academic tracks become increasingly negative. This then has an impact on examination achievements. There is some evidence supporting this in the studies cited above, as well as in some US studies (see, for example, Berends, 1995).

However, there is evidence from Sweden (Erikson and Jonnson, 1996 – cited in Hatcher, 1998), where tracking is virtually non-existent and almost all teaching is in mixed ability groups, that differences in attainment – and attitudes – persist between social groups. In addition, DPT can tell us nothing about why the disenchantment with school cuts across social classes.

It appears, then that we need some other account of how these differences in attitude between year groups arise. There is a substantial literature on motivational problems in school (see Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000, for an overview of mainly US literature in this field), focusing on the problems of maintaining interest within school. In Coalton, this is seen to be a particular problem, and several projects have been set up aiming to reduce demotivation at school, particularly in the later years. For example, the 'Learning to Work' programme (see Monteith et al, 2000) involves a variety of methods including student teacher mentoring, extended work experience and short vocational courses to try to re-engage students with education. There is a difficulty with this approach, however, if the aim is to re-engage students with learning in schools, specifically. An evaluation, conducted by the authors (Coldwell et al, 2001), of a project which provides placements in Coalton college for pupils aged 14 to 16 in construction related courses found, in common with a national study (Golden and Lewis, 2000) that whilst pupils responded very positively to the very different learning environment of a college construction centre, their attitudes to learning environments available in school actually worsened. However, other initiatives in the district have focussed more closely on improving motivation within school.

One such initiative, Charter for Transition, aims to both improve attainment across transitions and develop the quality of teaching and learning throughout schools. There has been a focus on improving pastoral links between primary and secondary schools for many years in Coalton, and there is a large and growing body of literature on this aspect of school transition (most recently, in the UK, work by Maurice Galton's team - see Galton et al, 1999). There is less literature on curriculum continuity (notably Lee et al, 1995), but what there is points to the need for primary and secondary teachers to work together to ensure the curriculum in secondary schools fits the needs of each child. We will be reporting on the interim findings of our evaluation of this particular project at the end of 2001, but our preliminary work indicates that as schools develop better individual target setting, better use of data and better focus on the progression of each pupil, attainment improves and - hand in hand with this - pupil attitudes improve. An important feature of such work (as noted by Rudduck, 1996) is that the pupils themselves are able to work on setting their own targets, enabling them to take responsibility for their own learning and development.

The fact that so many of our pupils seem to have a relatively unsatisfactory experience in secondary education is of profound concern to all, but in Coalton at least there are signs that these experiences are improving, and that innovative work in schools is driving these improvements forward. We hope that these preliminary findings will add to the growing understanding of this problem at the local, national and international levels.

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Glossary

Education Action Zone (EAZ): a small area (containing in the region of three secondary schools and ten primary schools) receiving additional government funding to raise educational attainment.

Further Education (FE): education provided to people over the age of the age of 16, at a level below that of university courses, often in vocational and technical subjects. Usually delivered at colleges.

General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSE): qualifications in individual subjects (e.g. mathematics, history, science) usually taken at age 16.

Higher Education (HE): education at university course level, usually undertaken at age 18 or older.

Local education authority (LEA): body responsible for the provision and co-ordination of public education services at the local level; similar to the US school district.

New Opportunities Fund (NOF): National Lottery fund aimed at developing small-scale, localised technology-based projects.

Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED): The government organisation charged with ensuring schools meet required standards, primarily by inspection visits.

Single Regeneration Budget (SRB): Government fund used to regenerate economically and socially deprived areas. Each year produces a new 'round' of funding. These rounds are distinguished chronologically by number – Highway to Success is funded by 'SRB3'.

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