

Disengaged and disaffected young people; **surviving the system**

Youth today

Young people's vulnerability has long been a source of anxiety for those responsible for ensuring their safe development to adulthood; of particular concern are those perceived to be disadvantaged by their socioeconomic or family status. From Willis' (1977) seminal study of the educational roots of inequality to more recent explorations of the burgeoning mental health and behavioural issues among adolescents (Hagell, 2004), or the effects of globalisation on at risk youth (Hull, Zacher & Hibbert, 2009), their fragility and degree of exposure has made many apprehensive. Education is depicted as a structural aspect of a risky environment, presenting perils which some young people fail to navigate successfully, with lasting detriment to their lives (Hagell, 2004; Author & Morrison, 2009). As for young people themselves, the YouTube generation does not necessarily see itself as powerless or as a victim of a punitive world (Hull et al., 2009). A counter-narrative presents youth as often agentive, creative and buoyant, moderating and overcoming the hazards perceived by adults (Hull & Katz, 2006).

The theoretical terrain which supports consideration of hazards and resistance, and the policies made in response, is wide-ranging. Literature on the concepts of wellbeing, happiness, resilience and buoyancy attempts to identify the inter-related factors in young people's education and lives which enable schooling to be experienced positively, with constructive academic and affective outcomes. Bailey (2009) and Author (2010) point to the increasing frequency with which policy documents in Western states refer to enjoyment as a key goal of education. Positive affective states are suggested to be potentially important both as a human right and in relation to their function in learning. Walker (2005, p. 103) suggests the need to establish an 'environment suitable for human flourishing', that is, human development which is wider than academic learning; the aim is a physical and affective context in which young people can experience their youth positively and reach their full potential. In England, a widely adopted national initiative, Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (**SEAL**), based on ideas of emotional intelligence, draws strongly on the psychology of wellbeing and embeds in schooling a responsibility for the affective experience of education and the mental health of young people.

This article traverses the conceptual terrain to arrive at a framework for scrutinising data from a national dataset, focusing on 65 young people in England perceived as disaffected or disengaged by their school or college of further education. It considers their views on the factors that have supported their development or otherwise, and presents a picture of how far young people in England are able to survive and thrive in school or college. The article starts from a global view of youth at risk and then moves from this wider context to examine the theory which frames consideration of how youth navigates and experiences the risky environment. It suggests that schooling presents major risks for many young people.

Youth at risk

From a global perspective, the position of youth is calamitous. Drawing on United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) data, Hull et al. (2009) suggest that a billion children live in poverty worldwide. In the UK, over two million live in poverty (Hirsch, 2009). UNICEF's assessment of the wellbeing of young people in Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) countries places the UK towards the bottom of the league table on a range of factors, including wellbeing based on school achievement at age 15; remaining in education beyond compulsory schooling; and transition to employment (Innocenti Research Centre, 2007). Hagell et al. (2004) present evidence that depression, anxiety, self-harm and problem conduct have risen continuously in the adolescent population in the UK since the mid-1980s. They conclude that, in contradiction to the analysis commonly presented by the popular press, these effects are not mainly related to changes in family types and socio-economic factors. Rather, the study suggests that the causal factors are interrelated in more complex ways. Educational experience is implicated as one factor.

The risk facing youth is variously conceived. A lack of educational achievement leads to economic risk, with a danger of lifetime exclusion from reasonably paid work or any paid employment at all. Young people are also depicted as emotionally at risk, facing increased stress in education and other environments. Fundamentally, they are feared to be at risk of having little chance to become what they wish to be, rather than what others wish them to be (Benhabib, 2002). The pressure of consumerism, the cognitive impact of the technology with which youth engages, and their economic exploitation as the future workforce potentially all shape young people in a way they may have little power to resist. Governments have responded with outpourings of policy and funding intended to reduce economic risk through education. Despite such efforts, Hull et al. (2009: 143) conclude in a review of relevant research that 'the literature is uniformly glum about and almost dismissive of the relevance of schooling as usual for future trajectories of youth in general and vulnerable youth especially.'

Ecclestone, Hayes and Furedi (2005: 192) resist this ubiquitous narrative and challenge 'the emergence of preoccupation with risk and a therapeutic ethos rooted in notions of the diminished self'. They deplore education which focuses on the emotional and social wellbeing of young people and schooling which is viewed as long term therapy, and yet their position fails to present an alternative means of addressing youth wellbeing. There is much evidence that many young people struggle to cope with the challenges in their life, suffering related mental health problems and social dysfunction; therefore, some young people at least are in need of help (Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2004; Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2003). However, the warning note sounded by Ecclestone et al. suggests a need for balance in the analysis of issues and the resultant evolution of policy and practice. The inclusion of more positive psychological and social analyses of agentive youth may counter the glumness which potentially precludes action.

The theoretical terrain

This section of the article reviews what has been discovered previously by research using theories relevant to both risk and resistance, including concepts of resilience, buoyancy, wellbeing and happiness and what might be relevant to understanding the position of disengaged or disaffected youth.

Resilience and buoyancy

Resilience is a contested concept, variously defined (Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004). It captures the ability to succeed or adapt despite the presence of factors which might predict the contrary (Martin & Marsh, 2006). How 'succeed' is described ranges from the negative, such as an absence of mental health problems, to the positive, for example educational achievement. Ryan and Deci (2000: 68) posit: 'that most people show considerable effort, agency, and commitment in their lives appears, in fact, to be more normative than exceptional'. Nevertheless, they also point to examples of many children who are listless and apathetic in school, as elsewhere. Resilience is common, but by no means universal. Also contested is how behaviour is assessed as resilient or otherwise. For example, Taylor and Brown (1988) suggest that the ability to persist with a positive view of oneself in the face of substantial and well-founded feedback about poor performance and chances of success may not be an irrational delusion, but a highly-developed adaptation to threatening circumstances. A considerable literature explores individual's psychological and context factors which may support resilience (Harvey & Delfabbro, 2004; Martin & Marsh, 2006; Morales, 2008; Morrison, Brown, D'Incau, Larson, O'Farrell & Furlong, 2006). While innate factors may be important, it is those factors of context open to manipulation, particularly in schools, which are of relevance here.

Buoyancy is a related concept. Martin and Marsh (2008: 55) argue that it may be distinguished from resilience in both degree and kind. Resilience, they argue, relates to response to a grave degree of threat, 'acute, chronic, intense and sustained adversity', whereas buoyancy relates to response to less severe, everyday difficulties and problems. The kind of outcome also differs. A lack of resilience leading to, for example, mental health issues is in contrast to a lack of buoyancy, the result of which may be reduced confidence and moderate stress. Buoyant students try to solve the problems they experience at school and deal with the stresses, whether solved or not. Martin and Marsh's position reflects something of the positive psychological orientation of those such as Ecclestone, et al. (2005) or the advocates of 'happiness' education (Ben-Shahar, 2007; Layard, 2005) who assume in the majority of children and young people some capacity to navigate successfully their education and life.

Martin and Marsh distinguish distal and proximal factors that may impact on buoyancy. They also conclude that the degree of anxiety experienced is a significant factor determining young people's degree of buoyancy. Variation is at the individual level, not class or school level. Setting aside variation caused by the innate or family characteristics beyond schools' control, the most

significant are suggested by Martin and Marsh's (op. cit.) study to be locus of control, academic engagement, self-efficacy and positive relations between students and teachers.

Happiness and wellbeing

There is a considerable literature related to the concepts of happiness and wellbeing based within philosophy, psychology, sociology and the 'rapidly emerging happiness industry' (Bailey, 2009: 795). Bailey points out that the last, particularly, has infiltrated and influenced the discourse of education. Although it may appear to explore the same concepts, the terrain is characterised by a multiplicity of definitions: work which distinguishes happiness and wellbeing; work which uses the two terms synonymously; and work which conceives one as a prior qualifying condition for achievement of the other (Miller, 2008; ?im?ek, 2009). Happiness is frequently conceived as a good and, in common with all other factors which may be so considered, is suggested by some to demand distribution amongst all. 'A more just distribution of resources and goods' (Fraser, 1996: 3) is linked to notions of social justice. Thus, it is argued, the experience of happiness by all students is a contribution towards a more just educational system.

In order to achieve equity in happiness, it is necessary to define what it is and to identify how it is secured; both are highly contested. This article has not space to review the wide literature attempting this, which would involve a sweep from Aristotelian *eudaimonia* onwards. The existence of a literature which considers wellbeing as a related or identical concept adds to the complexity of achieving an accurate conceptual map. A broad categorisation of approaches would distinguish subjective approaches, which consider happiness/wellbeing to be an affective state perceived by the individual, and objective approaches, which describe the conditions, and particularly the fulfillment of needs, which create a state of happiness/wellbeing, irrespective of the individual's perceptions. Ryan and Deci (2000: 74-75) note 'the basic needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness must be satisfied across the life span for an individual to experience an ongoing sense of integrity and well-being or "*eudaimonia*". This implies that the satisfaction of needs leads both to wellbeing and happiness, though *eudaimonia* as used here is very different in meaning from that intended by Aristotle. There are numerous difficulties with both approaches. Affective states oscillate and require ever-increasing levels of stimulation, resulting in what Bailey (2009: 799) terms the 'hedonic treadmill'. Schools, therefore, cannot realistically aim at consistent and universal levels of happiness. Alternatively, the specification of conditions that fulfill basic needs has been largely predicated on Western, Anglophone cultural values (?im?ek, 2009).

Consequently, a debate about whether justice can be done to individuals irrespective of their cultural choices and values is live. Nussbaum (n.d.), from a North American perspective, argues for universal fundamental entitlements, as people's conscious preferences may reflect their social conditioning within an unjust society. She suggests a list of ten universal capabilities which people should enjoy. Of relevance to schools are, for example, capabilities five and seven:

5. Not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety.

7. Affiliation. Having the social bases of self-respect and nonhumiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others.

(Adapted from Nussbaum's list of ten capabilities, 2003, pp. 41-42)

There is considerable evidence that such rights are not universally enjoyed by schoolchildren (Araújo, 2005; Carter & Osler, Author & Morrison, 2009; Slee, 1994). In contrast, Mahmood (2001) argues from an Islamic perspective and posits that to set aside people's choices and preferences with a universal 'entitlement' is both unworkable and oppressive. The value base of what is considered a right will vary considerably amongst different communities in the UK and any assumed 'universal' entitlement risks compromising the values of particularly minority groups.

Notions of resilience, buoyancy, happiness, wellbeing and social justice are therefore intertwined in complex ways. From the perspective of school students, the current policy imperative for wellbeing and enjoyment of schooling links to the discourse of both human rights and happiness (Author, 2010).

Setting a framework

This brief review of concepts related to the experience of youth at school has highlighted varied positions. The scope of studies referenced ranges from a global view of the quantum of young people displaying characteristics perceived as negative, with conclusions usually of dismay, to studies of samples of young people who face particular difficulties, leading to conclusions that are more likely to admit the possibility of positive outcomes. From a distance, the plight of young people seems grim. Close up, what comes into focus is their capacity, even in challenging circumstances, to lead a life they value and that others view positively.

The article takes as a starting point the position of Willis (1977), writing over thirty years ago; neither nihilist determinism that structure dictates all, nor naïve assumption that education or individual agency can consistently sever the shackles of family and class reproduction. We must have something constructive 'to say about what to do Monday morning' (op. cit. :186), while recognising the reality of how oppressive are the circumstances faced by some young people. The article therefore uses data from a particular group of young people to explore their view on the factors that have enabled them to experience school or college positively, and to believe they have or will have successful outcomes, or the contrary. Drawing on Martin and Marsh (2006, 2008) the article selects two critical factors on which to focus: the self-perception of competence and the sense of relatedness to staff.

Listening to young people

Alcoff (1991/2: 25) suggests that 'the bearing of our location and context on what it is we are saying, (and) should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice'. This stricture comes into sharper focus when the subject of practice is those who are in some sense 'other' to the dominant or powerful. The powerlessness of the young, relative to adults and teachers, deepens the question of the moral authority and authenticity of their interlocutor. This is a relative powerlessness. Those who formally hold subordinate positions in organisations, including young people in schools, may derive power from numerous sources (Mechanic, 1962). Nevertheless learners have access to fewer sources and there is much evidence of disempowering relationships with teachers (Author, 2010) Listening to young people and communicating what is heard is therefore as problematic as listening to any other group in a position of subjection. For some, it raises issues about the validity of the speakers' perceptions and words that appear not to be the case when listening to adults. For Wragg (2002), for example, analyses of teachers' words do not appear to demand questioning the interviewee's identity in the same way as do young people's. The immaturity of youth is a convenient reason to doubt (Grace, 1995; Ruddock & Fielding, 2006). A more serious objection is one which applies equally to adults and children; that the socialising effects of a subordinate position demand that we question how far what is said is shaped by negative experience, and is a construction of resistance. Power shapes a discourse which is the result of an individual's location within a social structure (Lensmire, 1998). Thompson and Bell (2005) suggest that school is permeated by power, and that this shapes and limits what young people understand as the possibilities of being a student. We return, therefore, to the debate between Nussbaum's (n.d.) perspective and that of Mahmood (2001) for our orientation to views shaped by an unjust society, and how far we must listen or set them aside to achieve greater equity.

There are also doubts about the researcher's position in representing a group of individuals. Said (1989) believes that 'to represent someone or even something has now become an endeavor as complex and as problematic as an asymptote' (op cit.: 206). Speaking with and for a group faces serious challenges as the researcher may unintentionally or otherwise use the knowledge and understanding which results in ways which have a negative impact on the group which is studied (Alcoff, 1991/92). The position of this article follows on from Alcoff's arguments; that silence is as political an act as to speak, and that there is a moral obligation to use the gift of words from young people to advance social justice. The researcher's power is acknowledged as gatekeeper and controller of what is reported and how it is framed. However, the aspiration is authentic listening with sustained attentiveness (Fielding & Ruddock, 2006) and to use what is heard to challenge, rather than to embed further, the powerlessness of many young people. The aim is to join students in their struggle for meaning, both affirming and questioning (Lensmire, 1998). The moral authority for such an endeavour is the belief that, though students can and do achieve a great deal in shaping their experience and challenging policy, 'they cannot do it all by themselves' (op cit.: 286) if transformation of the grim scenario painted at the opening of the article is to be influenced.

Methodology

The article draws on a national dataset established by the then Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCFS, 2009, 2010). Policy change following the agenda of *Every Child Matters* is arguably the most far-reaching for some time. In order to evaluate its impact, QCA and DCFS commissioned a longitudinal study to follow change and its relationship to policy in age 11-19 education in England. The baseline year constructed 45 case studies of comprehensive, grammar and specialist status schools, academies, general, sixth form and specialist further education colleges. An additional study constructed cases for eight schools for students with special educational needs. The age range, size and location of case organisations varied across the spectrum. Each case organisation provided a range of data including descriptive and policy documents, interviews with governors, staff, parents, partner organisations and students. All Year 11 and approximately 50 per cent of Year 12 learners in the case organisations were also surveyed by questionnaire, resulting in 2,700 responses from Year 11 and 2,200 from Year 12, a response rate of 76 per cent.

The purpose of the baseline year was to establish the state of play in relation to four major policy aims; that students should enjoy learning, achieve, want to progress further in education or training, and become confident and responsible citizens. The result of the baseline year is a dataset which is broad and deep, including data from 798 Year 11 and Year 12 learners. Analysis of students' views in relation to enjoyment has been published (Author, 2010). This article focuses on one subset of the data from 65 young people in mainstream schools and colleges perceived by teachers or lecturers to be disaffected; that is, they are perceived to hold a negative attitude to school/college, or to be disengaged; that is, they have to some degree ceased to participate in education. They were identified by the case organisations and so reflect an identity decided by the school or college, rather than necessarily a self-identity. The proportion of this group in relation to the whole sample of 798 should not be seen as significant, as each case organisation was asked to identify a small number of those they saw as disaffected or disengaged. What is of importance is that the size of this sub-group of the sample provides rich data from a substantial number of young people perceived as on the fringe of the educational process. As a group they are not those who have withdrawn completely from education or training. Rather, they are those who are negotiating a position and path for themselves which is likely to be both a result of and a response to how they are perceived by others (Thompson & Bell, 2005). They are those who are finding a way to engage with an educational experience, though not fully within the mainstream. Their experience and the reasons why they have neither exited completely nor been able or willing to engage fully are particularly relevant to understanding the position of fragile youth at school or college.

The characteristics of the group are only partly known, as not all provided complete information. Of the 65 interviews 56 were with individuals and nine within groups. The large majority were from Year 11 (age 15-16) with a smaller number from Year 10 and Year 12. Some 23 interviews

were with girls, 38 were with boys and four of the groups were mixed. The majority (52) of interviews were with learners who had spent their whole lives in Britain. Only two were recorded as having moved here from abroad, or speaking a first language other than English, but the data are incomplete on this issue. Only eight cases stipulate White as their ethnicity – the majority of cases were unassigned. The organisations were predominantly community schools/colleges (37), but sixth form colleges (8), foundation schools (6), general colleges of further education (5), academies (2) and a voluntary aided and a tertiary college are also represented.

In the interviews learners were asked about their opportunities to learn, their pathway choices and their experience of teaching and learning. They were also asked about what they saw as the purpose of education and if they enjoyed it. Content analysis identified references to competence and relatedness to staff. Selected descriptive statistics from the survey provide a context for the interview analysis.

Competence

A number of themes emerged from young people's views on their competence. A small number located a failure to achieve in their own attributes. They saw themselves as lazy or just not willing to engage with education:

Well I have had quite a lot of time off in recent years, but no, there is nothing distracting me or anything like that. It is just me being lazy.

Overall there were four references to being lazy and 15 to not being bothered. Two described their emotional difficulties with anger. There were 15 references to mood or being 'moody'. These emotions were generally perceived to be provoked by school. The great majority did not paint themselves as incompetent, but as unable to cope with unreasonable demands and or conditions. In particular they deplored long stretches of time without physical activity where they were required to do a task they did not understand, by means of first listening to the teacher or reading instructions and then writing. They make repeated reference to how intolerable this becomes and how futile: 'I hate it. It's writing every single day. It's all day. It's every single lesson, all day for a certain day'. This student just wanted to leave school as soon as possible. There were 91 references to being bored from 13 respondents or the situation being boring from 26 respondents, indicating a widespread experience. This might be dismissed as a standard, unthinking reaction from adolescents. However there is much supplementary evidence from the young people expanding their concept of boredom and its effect on their learning (Author, 2010), suggesting that the term is being used meaningfully. The pace and level of demands were also seen as problematic by many. One described working in the small hours of the morning to keep up with project work. In some cases the pressure caused an individual to opt out to some degree:

If you see your grades and you feel that you are behind the grades you want to do, it puts

more pressure on the pupil to work harder and when you work harder you wear yourself out and then you can't and are grumpy. Which keeps you away from school. That's why I don't want to know what my grades are.

The student does not feel incompetent so much as subject to unachievable demands, to the extent that exit appears the best response. This might be interpreted as a defence strategy to avoid accepting lack of competence; as such it would reflect Taylor and Brown's (1988) theory that maintaining a view of competence in the face of evidence to the contrary is an adaptive response for survival. An alternative view is that unvarying didactic pedagogy combined with a fast pace meets the learning requirements of some students, but excludes many. From this perspective, the young people's analysis is accurate, that failure to achieve is a result not of their incompetence but of an inappropriate learning environment. The latter perspective is borne out by the evidence they present of successful learning in classes delivered through a different pedagogy or in different conditions, related to autonomy and personal relations. Numerous instances were given of experiential learning involving either experimentation in science classes or discussion in, for example, religious education and philosophy and ethics, where students who did not engage with other aspects of the curriculum were enabled to do so. Detailed evidence is presented elsewhere of learners' perceptions that such engagement could induce a flow state, where rather than just being happier or less bored, young people believed they were learning (Author, 2010). Whether such learning led to the most commonly accepted indicator of success, accredited outcomes, is not known. What is clear is that many young people were able to distinguish periods of learning and of not learning and related these to the pedagogic practice. The conditions which supported learning were consistently explained to be:

- Clarity of instruction, 'getting explained it properly'
- Experiential methods 'activities, not writing'
- Social learning, 'cos if you are working with other people, if you get stuck on the question, then, and then they know it, then they can help you out and you are not asking the teacher all the time'
- Clear direction on improvement, 'they just told us how to improve it and I have'.

These conditions were not reported by this group of young people as frequently present in school. Those in sixth form, further education colleges or special units for the disengaged more often positively noted their presence. There is not, however, a simple division between effective and ineffective learning environments in school and other organisations. For example, in one instance, a student noted that the supposed learning of customer care in a special unit offering retail experience comprised, 'they just coming in, buy the food and bugger off'.

A few young people acknowledged that school and teachers had done everything they could to help them learn and located the failure to achieve in their own attitudes, skills and abilities. The situation which emerged from the majority was more complex. In part, echoing Munn & Lloyd's

(2005) study in Scotland, young people acknowledged their part in disengaging themselves from school; failings in controlling their emotions adequately, not making enough effort and preferring socialising with friends to hard work. However, they also linked these aspects of their behaviour to the experience of school. Sitting bored and uncomprehending through classes they did not follow and with tasks they could not achieve did not so much make them feel incompetent as coerced into an unreasonable and oppressive environment from which they took avoiding action. 'I've got maths. I can't be bothered to go to maths so you just sit in the toilets and it isn't always that great'. School class was so negative an environment that a toilet was preferable.

Nevertheless, all but a few of the young people gave instances of engagement with learning in school or elsewhere:

I like going up to my brother's and learning about computers and PCs and that stuff. He tries helping me read as well. If I wasn't at school and I spent six weeks with my brother every day, all day, I'd be able to read like everybody else.

It is impossible to know if this is a realistic assessment of the potential for achievement, but many young people were buoyed up by such belief that they could achieve, that they were competent, but just not in the way that was demanded for most of the time in school.

There is evidence to support the young people's assertion that it is primarily school conditions rather than their lack of competence which make learning difficult. As explained in the description of the sample, this group of young people comprised those who were perceived as having experienced difficulties at school or college, but who were still nevertheless sufficiently connected to the community to be present at least some of the time. Some described the progress they had made in dealing with problems. The turnaround was linked to their moving to an environment with different conditions, adopting an alternative curriculum, or maturing, or a mix of these factors. For example one young woman felt, 'I think it was just me that changed. I thought the college was really good'. Does the changed attitude lead to perceptions of the college being good, or does a more appropriate environment lead to a more positive attitude? The looming reality of life after school also appeared to motivate a greater degree of endurance and effort from some.

Overall, these young people did not avoid taking responsibility for behaviour they could see was unhelpful to themselves and others: 'I've been kicked out a few times but it's my fault isn't it'. Neither were they willing to locate responsibility for their difficulties only in themselves. They offered poignant descriptions of both futile and productive activity and generally perceived the possibility of success in the future, if not the present.

Relatedness

Negative relationships with teachers were frequently reported among this group of young people.

A strong theme was a belief that some teachers did not like, respect or care about the individual in question. There was awareness of teachers' relief at the individual's removal from a class or from school. One group of three compared the attitude of their teacher in school – 'Mr X doesn't really care where we are' – with staff in their current alternative provision out of school:

- They are like people who actually look after us
- Yeah. They make sure we are there

On occasion a relationship was reported as not just indifferent, but intentionally destructive. One young man, gaining a place at college, proudly reported this to teachers:

When it came to my Head of House she actually turned round and said that it's a load of rubbish, there's no point doing it 'cos I ain't going to get nowhere in life 'cos I never come to school. So I'm going to get nowhere in life and I might as well just drop all my dreams and just be a bum basically, live off Social.

Whether the Head of House actually used these words literally is doubtful. What matters is that the young man understood the response as fundamentally dismissing his achievement and competence. However, such instances of active hostility are a minority experience. The weight of the data indicates a perception of some staff who are unaware of or indifferent to some students.

Negative relationships with teachers provoked two responses amongst this group. One was aggression: 'Some of them would go off on me I would go off on them back. I can't just sit there and let them shout at me like that'. The second was exit, either psychologically or physically: 'When they don't come and help you, that's when you start lacking it and you don't bother'. In this case it is perceived indifference rather than hostility which caused disengagement.

The experience of school is described often in kinaesthetic terms, as young people attempt to negotiate an alien place where the official language is not familiar and action is constrained. There is a contrast between a high level of noise, with teachers talking a great deal and in some cases shouting, and the low level of physical activity, stillness being required in class. Some recognise a gulf in communication with teachers, their slang language being corrected, so that they need an alternative vocabulary to that used at home in order to communicate. Other young people depict a kind of uncomprehended noise coming at them. One group describe: 'the teachers they nag, nag, nag, nag'. Another young man who had been sent home from school two days running and was about to be sent home for a third recounts: 'I was talked to by Mr X and he was talking, talking, talking and talking and he said he'd had enough'. The key point grasped through the noise of talking is that the teacher is telling him to go home and stay there until examinations start. The communication is one-way, removing a problem from the school.

By contrast, resonating with previous studies, the majority of young people in this group identified positive relations with some staff, either in their school, or sometimes at alternative provision or in the further education to which they had progressed (Attwood, Croll & Hamilton, 2003). They were not incapable of positive relations, but did not enjoy them universally (Lloyd, Kendrick & Stead, 2001; Pomeroy, 1991). They had a limited vocabulary to analyse the elements that supported a good relationship. Some staff were described as nice, for example. The characteristics valued were a genuine interest in the welfare of the individual, trust, making an effort to help and giving praise. Some relationships appeared critical in cementing engagement or the contrary. Though there might be positive relationships with some teachers, if one or a small number were negative this had in some cases a disproportionate impact on learning. One young man described his experience:

What helps me learn is - like - I can get on quite well with most of my teachers, but the ones that I don't get on well with I don't get on well with at all. I'm just a completely different person with some teachers that I don't like - respect. So like if I can get on with the teacher then that's like I usually want to work well for them. If I don't get on with the teacher then not a lot tends to get done - it's like petty arguments and just me being cocky.

Similarly positive relationships appear to take on extreme importance. The relationship with teachers was contrasted to that with mentors or learning assistants or college lecturers. For one young man, the turning point to greater engagement was the provision of a mentor:

It's where we got mentors you see and like; they care about every single thing we do wrong and that...we get spoken to by our mentors and they basically say we're not being well, naughty like, saying we're messing up everyone else's GCSEs.

This young man had come to understand how his behaviour was wrecking not only his own but everyone else's learning. He had re-engaged. For another in college, the support of learning assistants had a similar effect:

They're just good if I ever need to talk to them if I'm upset or anything they'll always be there for me and they're not like proper teachers, 'cos like some teachers are just... I don't want to talk to them 'cos they're teachers.

One young woman at college described the lecturers as shouting praise: 'they are shouting at you that you can do well, that you have the potential, and it does make you feel that I am going to do well you know'. The description of shouting is her perception of the experience; the clarity and firmness of the message.

Resilience and buoyancy studies show the importance of relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995;

Ryan & Deci, 2000). What emerges from this dataset is evidence that, despite the fact that most students had been able to form constructive relations, they believed that they had also been pathologised by some teachers as not worth effort or requiring to be removed from the community. In adult relationships, failures are typically located to some degree with both parties. In teacher–student relationships, a kind of ambivalence seemed present. There was an awareness of the failure of teachers to connect positively yet, simultaneously, they were not challengeable because of their status as teachers. They were both fallible and infallible in the perception of students. Despite the sometimes negative impact of poor relationships, many young people nevertheless retain a sense of their essential worth and competence.

Hirschman's (1970) theory of exit, voice, loyalty may be helpful. The theory has been applied in numerous contexts including adolescent behaviour (Gilligan, 1988). The definition of each of the three elements and of a fourth, neglect (Kira, Birditt, & Fingerman, 2005) has varied. Hirschman (1970: 16) originally characterised exit as literal; leaving an organisation or ceasing to buy its products, and voice as dissatisfaction leading to words or actions, from 'faint grumbling to violent protest', intended to prompt a response. Loyalty was likely to inhibit exit and encourage voice. Where exit is possible, use of voice is dependent on a calculation of the relative cost of staying or leaving, and of the speaker's power to achieve change in the organisation.

Hirschman's view of exit as marking a cessation of psychological or physical contact is relevant here. Some young people had literally absented themselves or, though still in school or college, were no longer interested in bringing about change to better meet their needs. One young man explained: 'I want to finish school and that's it. That's what I want'. He was mostly absent. In his own estimation, even when he was physically there he was as much psychologically absent.

Hirschman differentiates public goods from private goods. There may be no exit from public goods such as police services. Education is a hybrid; students may exit from education, but not from the detriment caused by exit. Consequently, all that is achievable is what Hirschman (1970: 102) terms a 'partial exit'. It is not that students are unaware of the consequences of choosing, for example, to exit. One young man typifies the dilemmas faced: 'Obviously I need to get my grades to go up for jobs like and all that', but in class, he sits at the back with his friends while the 'geeks' sit at the front:

I don't feel like I'm noticed, like I just feel like I am brushed aside and they just get on with the people who can and do the lesson and they say them two can't do it and they'll just leave them. That's how I feel.

In mathematics, he achieved and was 'chuffed to bits about that'. In most other classes his disruptive behaviour is followed by multiple detentions. Staying or leaving is likely to bring the same result of failure to get the grades. Gender is also relevant in that adolescent girls are suggested to be less likely to take the exit option, fearing a loss of relationships (Gilligan, 1988).

McCluskey's (2008) study suggests that girls are less likely to be excluded but more often involved in disruptive behaviour than is sometimes assumed. It is not statistically significant, but perhaps indicative that there are nearly twice as many young men as young women in this dataset. Nevertheless, a third are young women, so their perspective is well represented in the dataset.

This group of young people is irrevocably caught by the impact of this public good. Consequently, their calculation of the benefits of staying or going is acutely sensitive to its inescapable cost to them. Simultaneously, the voice option is weak, due to their lack of experience in utilising it effectively and their relative powerlessness. The cost to the organisation of their exit was, in students' perception, calculated by some teachers as minimal or even beneficial. Young people are therefore extremely vulnerable, with little leverage from voice and facing significant detriment from exit. The third option of loyalty was exhibited by very few. One young woman pretends to be happy in order to retain positive relations: 'I don't enjoy it as much as I say I do but I just let them believe that. I just put on a happy face'. Kira et al. (2005: 201), comparing the reactions of people of different ages in conflict situation, conclude that young people are more likely to use exit and destructive strategies than adults. The cards are seriously stacked against young people in that it would appear that they are in a context where only partial escape is possible, their repertoire of strategies is biased towards the destructive and that, anyway, the rewards for many of staying or going remain strictly limited. Their choices are narrow and the outcomes negative, whatever their choice.

Societal response

Hirschman (1970: 1) sets out the issue clearly:

No matter how well a society's basic institutions are devised, failures of some actors to live up to the behavior expected of them are bound to occur.... Each society learns to live with a certain amount of such dysfunctional or mis- behavior; but lest the misbehavior feed on itself and lead to general decay, society must be able to marshal from within itself forces which will make as many of the faltering actors as possible revert to the behavior required for its proper functioning.

He also points out that voice is what we have to work with. The views of interested parties on what needs to be changed are the foundations for improvement. If there is acceptance of this premise, and that of this article, that young people's voice must be taken seriously, the data indicate a serious dysfunction in education. The scale is indicated by the survey data. Ten per cent of young people in school (N=2700) and seven in further education (N=2200) felt that education was a waste of time.

The young people reported here accept a degree of responsibility. However, they also point to systemic failure of the curriculum, of pedagogy and of relationships. Most of the group were

enduring education, not changing it. Hirschman's premise is that society will wish to correct its dysfunction; the data presented here do not support such a view. Rather, what appears to be in operation is a kind of homeostatis, where the system sustains a steady state. The weak impact of voice and of exit, the latter being seen as a benefit to the organisation in some cases, exerts little internal pressure for change. Those young people who will not or cannot accommodate the prevailing practice are removed or disempowered, most commonly not through deliberate explicit exclusion but by subtle signals of their perceived outlier nature. Even those rigorous efforts to support young people by means of, for example, alternative provision or mentors pathologises their position.

There is also little evidence of change due to external pressure. Using the government's own benchmark data on academic outcomes in 2009, nearly half (49.6 per cent) in the maintained sector did not achieve five or more GCSEs at grade A*-C or the equivalent, including English and mathematics. Despite this, recent changes to the Secondary Education System remain relatively peripheral with curriculum change much more widespread than change in pedagogy or relationships (Author & Foskett, 2007). Other data suggest that affective outcomes are equally limited. The survey data from case organisations indicate wide variation in the proportion enjoying each school, in Year 11 from 13 per cent to 73 per cent, and in Year 12 from 31 per cent to 86 per cent. For those in compulsory schooling, in only nine case organisations was there a majority giving a positive response. Only a half (51 per cent) felt school had encouraged them to learn more and only a third (35 per cent) felt that they had enough say in their own learning. The evidence of dysfunction is compelling.

The young people reported here are buoyant in that they had adapted to the context sufficiently to remain at least partially in the system. However, though they had adapted they had not solved the challenges. In many cases they did not believe that they were likely to achieve positive outcomes from education. If wellbeing is assessed using subjective perceptions of affective states, then young people remain apparently upbeat. If objective measures of wellbeing are used such as time in school, accredited outcomes, progression, then this group are vulnerable. They are surviving, but will face further challenges to their buoyancy if they are to thrive beyond school or college. The same ambivalence is apparent as reflected at the start of this article. The overview suggests a group who are at risk; an outgroup of adolescents caught in a structure which marginalizes them. Close up, many are self-confident and hopeful. Whether such qualities are self-deceptive and adaptive to the probability of long-term detriment or genuinely reflective of their ability to shape their lives positively in the face of risk will only be apparent at a point in the future, by which time it may be too late to rectify damage.

A minority of the young people acknowledge their choice to remain outside the system and see the nature of the latter as irrelevant to their decision. The majority can clearly identify those elements which are, at least in part, responsible for their disaffection or disengagement. The question arises, however much public hand wringing there may be about at risk youth, whether

society and educators wish to change the system or wish to sustain homeostasis. The attempts reported here to improve the experience of the young people were largely to help them adjust to or cope with the current model of education. Such intentions reflected considerable effort from some staff within the current parameters allowed to them and were often appreciated by learners. However, this should not obscure the overall intention to maintain a mainstream provision which is not appropriate for a significant proportion of learners. The case data indicates that, in many parts of the system, curriculum and pedagogy have not changed radically and relationships between learner and teacher fail (Gorard et al., 2008). There were also indications that attempts to disrupt homeostasis are resisted. Some mainstream young people in the focus group interviews objected if attention was paid or rewards given to those they saw as disruptive, 'the ones who don't actually do any work'. As McCluskey's (2008) and this study suggest, included students can view other students very negatively and support their exclusion. A discourse of equality emerged where rewards were merited by high achievers and attention should be given primarily to those who worked hard and behaved, the view of those characterised by some of the disaffected as 'geeks'. As reported by the 65 interviewees, some teachers adopted neglect or removal as strategies for avoiding change.

The notion is ongoing that the function of education is not to educate all equally, but to educate differentially and to prepare learners for hierarchically distinctive roles in the economy and society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Freidenberg, 2009). The evidence presented here suggests that some young people achieve buoyancy, that is, they cope with the system, by two primary means; first they persist in locating responsibility for difficulties at least in part in the system, thereby maintaining a belief in their own competence. Second, they persist in a belief in their future success, whether justified or not. While these strategies may protect their self esteem, neither impacts on a context which is likely to fail them and lead to enduring detriment. If young people such as those reported here are to be included in education, additional or alternative provision may be counter-productive. Adjustments to the mainstream are needed. They themselves are able to speak lucidly about what helps them learn or proves a barrier. What is lacking may not be knowledge of how to change, as evidenced by many studies of the disaffected, but the will to set aside current convictions that economic competitiveness resides in education's homeostasis. For how long is it to be perceived as in the nation's interests to depend on the resilience or buoyancy of about ten percent of young people to survive a system which excludes a significant number, and so puts them at risk? They are clear on what it is in education that helps them to learn and what prevents them learning. The foundational need is for 'society... to marshal from within itself forces' (Hirschman, 1970: 1) to make the voice of young people more influential, and in response to shift policy more radically, rather than continuing to create policies which, though putatively designed to address the 'needs' of this group, function to pathologise them and provide a smokescreen for the maintenance of educational homeostasis.

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