

**CENTRE *for* ECONOMIC  
P E R F O R M A N C E**

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### **Disengagement 14-16: Context and Evidence**

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**Skills for all**  
research programme

## Abstract

This paper presents an overview of our current state of knowledge regarding poor motivation of 14-16 year old school pupils in the UK. A number of experts in the field from a variety of disciplines presented papers on this topic to a series of seminars held at the London School of Economics between 2002 and 2003. These papers, summarised here, present evidence from a historical, comparative, and social science perspectives and report the results of evaluation of government intervention programmes to improve motivation. International comparisons (PISA) show UK disengagement below the OECD average but the UK has the strongest link between socio-economic disadvantage and disengagement. We identify a very small 'out of touch' group who have practically lost touch with school and a larger group – around one fifth of the cohort - who could be characterised as 'disaffected but in touch'. Finally, we identify a further group – perhaps 15 per cent of the cohort who gain between 1 and 4 GCSE passes at Grades A\*-C but who have not reached full potential as a result of loss of interest in learning. The 'out of touch' group often requires intensive one-on-one mentoring outside the school context. Evaluation of government intervention programmes has not so far shown an obvious way forward for the 'disaffected but in touch' group, targeted principally by workplace learning measures. For the '1-4 Grade C' group, there may be something of a magic bullet - namely better vocational options.

Keywords: disengagement; motivation; under-achievement  
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## Disengagement 14-16: Context and Evidence

### Introduction

Starting in 2001, the Centre for Economic Performance (CEP) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) have worked together on a programme of research entitled *Skills for All* with financial support from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

When building the research programme it became clear that motivation of young people still in compulsory education to continue with learning after the age of 16 was fundamental to achieving a more skilled population. The Skills for All programme therefore includes research which investigates 14-16 motivation and, in particular, the role of vocational courses in improving overall achievement. Work in this area has been led by researchers at the NFER, who have considerable experience in the field of 14-16 learning, and evaluation of work-related initiatives in schools (Nelson et al., 2001; Saunders et al., 1997).

While discussing the scope of our research in this area, it became clear that there was a pressing need to ‘stand back’ from the large number of initiatives (New Start, GNVQ Part One Pilot Projects, Disapplication of the National Curriculum at Key Stage 4, Neighbourhood Support Fund to name but some) to reflect on what is known about motivation 14-16, and to integrate new knowledge. We therefore sought and obtained additional funding from the Economic and Social Research Council to hold a series of six seminars.

These seminars were to serve as a forum where academics, practitioners and policy makers could construct a conceptual framework for understanding the complexity of this field of activity, draw conclusions from recent evaluation and plan future research strategies.

The ESRC agreed to fund the series under the title ‘How to Motivate (De-Motivated) 14-16 Year Olds; with Special Reference to Work Related Education and Training’ and six seminars were held over an 18 month period between December 2002 and November 2003. The

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<sup>1</sup> Work published from the *Skills for All* programme can be found at <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/programs/skills/>

following definition of poor motivation/disengagement (the two terms are used interchangeably throughout the paper) formed the starting point for the papers.

Students who might be described as ‘disengaged from learning’ will be found across the spectrum of school achievement.<sup>2</sup> We can identify the following behaviours –

- disengagement and achievement at or above potential
- disengagement and achievement below potential and/or failure to master basic skills

Both are matters for concern and should be tackled. However, achievement below potential and/or failure to master basic skills is the issue requiring more urgent attention and this was the main focus of the seminars. In particular, we examined the evidence that vocational learning in a variety of forms can be useful in tackling disengagement and achievement below potential.

This paper summarises the main conclusions that emerged from the papers given at these seminars and from the subsequent discussion. The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 1 presents 14-16 motivation in historical dimension. Section 2 is concerned with relevant international comparisons while Section 3 maps the consequences of disengagement. Section 4 draws upon recent evaluation studies of government initiatives to ask ‘what works?’ in improving motivation and Section 5 concludes by offering a new framework for analysis of poor motivation at ages 14-16.

## **1. The Historical Dimension**

Poor motivation to learn and progress and consequent under-achievement has for some time been of concern to government. This concern was reflected in the 1997 White Paper *Excellence in Schools* and in a more recent White Paper *Schools Achieving Success* which claims that the 14-19 phase of learning has been ‘for too many young people .... a period of falling engagement in education and rising disaffection.’ The most recent government Green Paper *14-19: Extending*

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<sup>2</sup> Evidence from the PISA study (PISA, 2003) supports this view.

*Opportunities and Raising Standards* formally acknowledges ‘disengagement from learning’ as a major challenge for teachers, schools and government education targets.<sup>3</sup>

The Green Paper of 2002 identifies four major consequences of disengagement

- Students leaving school without a single GCSE pass
- A half of all students gaining less than five good GCSEs at school
- No further education after 16
- Early drop-out from post-compulsory education

The first question considered in the seminars was the extent to which disaffection now constitutes a more serious and qualitatively different challenge to schools than in the past.

Professor William Richardson surveyed the historical evidence, starting with the beginning of the post-war period. He sought to first understand the extent to which disaffection at ages 14-16 (or 15 prior to 1973) constituted a significant challenge to teachers and schools. In the immediate post-war period there was concern that young people had suffered disruption and loss as a result of the war. Alienation of young people from the values of society and the duties of citizenship was thought to be a danger and the Youth Service was established offering practical educational and leisure activities for young people, including a Youth Parliament.

In the secondary modern schools, which by the mid-1950s provided for around 70 per cent of the cohort in state-maintained schools, some schools and teachers took advantage of the lack of curricular prescription to teach skills and knowledge through practical activities (rural studies, farm studies, domestic studies). However, this period of experimentation was short-lived; it was increasingly constrained during the 1950s by parental pressure for the provision of external examinations in non-selective schools. After a period of resistance the government bowed to this demand in 1955 by the lifting of restrictions which had previously prohibited secondary modern pupils from being entered for GCE examinations. Thereafter, the secondary modern curriculum

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<sup>3</sup> *14-19: extending opportunities and raising standards* Green Paper published February 2002; the Department’s response to the Green Paper published January 2003.

became less innovative and more infused with the demands of formal subject knowledge leading to external certification.

Was disaffection and lack of motivation a problem that caused teachers and schools in the 1950s and 1960s the sort of challenge experienced today? The Newsom Report 'Half our Future' (1963)<sup>4</sup> reported on children of 'average and below average ability' – by definition mostly in secondary modern schools. The Report includes a survey of secondary modern pupils based on teachers' responses. Around two thirds are described as 'thoroughly cooperative' the remaining third as neither co-operative nor difficult, 2 per cent are reported as 'especially difficult'. Around 7 per cent of the less able pupils are reported as truanting in their final year.

Evidence quoted by Richardson from a range of studies undertaken between 1953 and 1965 confirms this picture. Pupils about to enter the labour market were not particularly enthusiastic about school but viewed it as a necessary stage prior to the much more exciting prospect of a job and a wage. It was the fact that school was the gateway to the next stage of working and earning and gaining some independence that led to it being tolerated when not actively enjoyed.

Richardson then characterised the decades following the 1960s as a period of progressive extension of public examinations to the whole age group which narrowed and restricted the modest practical element in the secondary modern curriculum - which Newsom found might constitute around 15 per cent of total curriculum time. Richardson considered that over the post-war period, schools in England have progressively moved away from an innovative, non-academic curriculum for the less academic and that pressure to extend public examinations and certification has been a major factor.

A further point touched upon by Richardson and also raised in discussion was the failure to establish the secondary technical school as an enduring component of educational provision. One reason put forward for the fading away of technical education in schools was the failure of employers to engage with the schools and to show interest in their work. Another was incoherence and a lack of distinctiveness of ethos or purpose, while local authorities found the

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<sup>4</sup> Central Advisory Council for Education (England) (1963).

secondary technical schools particularly expensive in resources and specialist teachers. From the 1960s onwards, Richardson claims, 'we see the result of the failure of institutional forms'. The only systematic (and small scale) attempt to establish a form of schooling that prepared for technical vocations disappeared in the move towards comprehensivisation.

Bayliss (2002) based her paper on first-hand experience of policy-making in the Department of Employment and the Manpower Services Commission in the 1970s up to the 1990s.

The late 1970s saw the beginning of a structural change in the demand for young workers which was to transform the school to work transition with important consequences for young people's aspirations and life chances.

Richardson drew our attention to the benign (and not so benign) neglect of Further Education by the then Ministry of Education during the post-war period.

- For a while (early 1950s to late 1960s) generous funding was made available and then cut back.
- Leadership from LEAs and the Ministry was poor
- Little thought was given to the wider role and purpose of Further Education Colleges once the intention of compulsory day release to the 'County Colleges' legislated for in the 1944 Education Act was abandoned.

However, according to Bayliss, it was the Department of Employment/ Manpower Services Commission which poured funds into FE in the late 1970s and 1980s and reshaped its mission as part of the government's efforts to deal with youth unemployment through government training schemes.

Throughout the post-war period until the early 1990s, the Ministry and the Department of Education and Science (DES) stand accused of failing to look beyond the horizon of schools and curriculum to system-wide issues of preparation and training for work. This, coupled with its perceived inability to respond rapidly to the policy priorities of the 1980s, helps to explain why the DES was only brought very late into the development of the Technical and Vocational



Education Initiative (TVEI) – conceived, as Bayliss tells us, by the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, the Education Secretary Keith Joseph and David Young the Chairman of the MSC.

Throughout the first thirty years of the post-war period, technical and vocational education and training in the early teenage years (i.e. as opposed to higher technical education which grew rapidly) was a low status, low profile activity, with a low policy priority. Employers and unions, who could have transformed and saved apprenticeship were ‘the dog that did not bark’. It was the youth unemployment and associated social and civil unrest of the early 1980s that finally thrust vocational education and training and the role of schools in preparing for working life to the forefront of policy thinking.

Bayliss stressed that ‘disaffection’ as presently recognised was not a priority for politicians in this period, nor was it a driving force in the setting up of the important programmes mentioned above.

What happened to TVEI? Margaret Thatcher thought that it would provide for ‘vocational qualifications in schools’. In fact, there were as many different TVEI programmes as there were schools, teachers welcomed the money and the freedom to innovate but, as HMI said in 1990 ‘TVEI is not a course of study nor is it concerned solely with technical and vocational skills’. Bayliss points out that TVEI appears to have left little by way of a lasting legacy in educational practice. It was squeezed out by the National Curriculum from 1988, thus falling victim to just that inter-departmental competition that determined its course in the first place, and its not inconsiderable achievements have been studiously ignored by commentators since.

## **2. How Does The UK Compare With Other Countries? Does The UK Have More Or Less ‘Disaffection’ Than Other Countries?**

Evidence from the Programme for International Student Assessment (henceforth PISA; OECD 2001) was presented by Andreas Schleicher, PISA co-ordinator at the OECD, in our second

seminar. PISA showed Britain (England and Wales and Scotland) performing among the best internationally on tests of practical literacy at age 15.<sup>5</sup>

The UK is, in fact, ranked in the top 8 internationally on 15 year olds' performance on tests of literacy (widely interpreted). At age 15, in common with many other countries, Britain has around one third of students performing at below the PISA Level 3.<sup>6</sup> However, Britain drops to 22<sup>nd</sup> place on OECD measures of the proportion of the population at Level 3 and above. Furthermore, while other countries have been fast reducing the proportion of young people without a Level 3 qualification, there has been much less progress in the UK.

One hypothesis which reconciles the high PISA score and the low proportions who attain a Level 3 qualification in the UK is as follows.<sup>7</sup> In other countries, those whose performance on the PISA tests at 15 places them at or below PISA Level 2 improve attainments in the years between 15 and 25. The most common route is through, for example, apprenticeship programmes or extended upper secondary education, usually with a vocational bias.<sup>8</sup>

The OECD statistics of UK students gaining Level 3 qualifications are somewhat out of line – substantially higher – than the government's own estimates. However, even taking the OECD's generous estimate of the proportions in the UK currently reaching Level 3 by age 25, international comparisons suggest that at least a further 20 or even 30 per cent of the cohort in

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<sup>5</sup> Prais (2003) has criticised many aspects of the PISA sampling, and testing methodology. More difficulties were experienced in the UK in achieving an acceptable sample of schools than in most other countries. The transformation of student performance on the tests into scaled scores is complex and far from transparent. This (widely-used) transformation methodology has been criticised by other commentators in relation to other International Studies eg Micklewright (2002) on TIMSS and Blum, Goldstein and Guerin-Pace (2001) on IALS. It may be easier to estimate the extent of any bias resulting from sampling deficiencies for the UK when the second PISA (2003) results are available.

<sup>6</sup> Finland, Korea and Ireland had between 20 and 30 per cent at or below Level 2; UK, France and US had between 30 and 40 per cent at or below Level 2; Spain, Italy and Germany had between 40 and 45 per cent at or below Level 2.

<sup>7</sup> At which PISA level on the reading literacy scale might we start to identify where those with lower than average achievements **and** achieving below potential might be located? The DFES (quoted above) suggests that the 5 GCSE A-C benchmark might be a starting point. We can then ask what proportion of the PISA cohort gained a GCSE English pass at Grade C or above? SFR 45/2001 Table 5 shows 54 per cent of 15 year olds in 2001 obtained an A\*-C pass in English. The 54 per cent with a Grade C or above in English GCSE in 2001-2002 (the PISA cohort) might correspond to PISA levels 4, 5 and around half of those at Level 3. This indicates that it would be misleading to define poor performers to be only those at PISA levels 1 and <1 (13 per cent) but that at least Level 2 should also be included.

<sup>8</sup> For an elaboration of this hypothesis see Steedman and McIntosh (2001).

the UK could achieve ISCED 3 qualification level if aspirations and application could be improved.

As already mentioned, UK 15 year olds performed particularly well in the PISA assessments of practical literacy. However, Schleicher pointed out that the UK also had one of the strongest relationships between socio-economic status and literacy performance, that is an above-average proportion of those at Level 2 and below in the UK came from the more socially disadvantaged groups. In other words, the over-representation of socially disadvantaged young people in the UK in the low literacy category was considerably greater than in many other European countries.

Around one quarter of UK students disagreed with statements such as ‘teachers do a lot to help students’ and ‘the teacher continues teaching until the students understand’. These percentages were considerably lower than the OECD average and similar to those in a number of other European countries. The relationship between good pupil teacher relations and high PISA achievement at the country level was unclear.

In addition to the seminar paper from Andreas Schleicher we can also draw upon a recently published OECD study (OECD, 2003) which examines student engagement at school based upon PISA 2000. This study is based upon two measures

- Belonging
- and
- Participation

‘Belonging’ does not correspond very closely to the concept of disengagement or demotivation widely used in the UK. Disengagement is principally concerned with identification with the goals and values of the school and willingness to engage with its programme of learning.

‘Belonging’ as investigated in the PISA study is a subjective measure of the extent to which the

student ‘feels at home’ in the school community.<sup>9</sup> The second measure, participation, is a more objective measure (although still based on student response) and asks about missing school, arriving late, skipping classes. We will report the UK position on both measures here but reservations concerning the ‘belonging’ measure should be noted.<sup>10</sup>

Seventeen per cent of UK students were identified as having a low sense of belonging, below the OECD mean of 25 per cent, and similar to Sweden, Ireland, Austria and Australia. On participation, the UK with 15 per cent, was also well below the OECD mean of 20 per cent and similar to Switzerland, France, Belgium, Austria and Australia.<sup>11</sup>

For the OECD as a whole, at the level of the individual school, the relationship between these two variables and literacy performance was only moderately strong.

Thus far we see that the UK does not differ substantially from the OECD average for disengagement. The estimates are a little below the estimate given above of around twenty per cent of students but the OECD measure was also different from those we have used.

However, the UK does stand out dramatically in one respect. On a measure of the probability of a strong association between low socio-economic status and participation the UK scores the highest of all the OECD countries. The favourable effect on participation of higher than average socio-economic status in the UK was also one of the highest. This finding is consistent with the previously quoted PISA result showing a strong relationship between literacy score and socio-economic status in the UK.

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<sup>9</sup> The ‘belonging’ measure in PISA was based on eight statements with which the student was asked to agree or disagree (on a continuum). The first six asked about the student’s feelings of belonging eg ‘I feel lonely’ the last two of the eight dealt with the student’s attitude to school – ‘I do not want to go to school’ and ‘I often feel bored’. These last two items did not correlate strongly with the preceding six and were therefore not used in construction of the standardised measure of ‘belonging’.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly, the two measures ‘belonging’ and ‘participation’ were found to be highly correlated at the country level but not at the individual school level.

<sup>11</sup> The ‘participation’ measure in PISA was based on a question that asked students how frequently they had been absent from school/skipped classes/arrived late for school in the previous two weeks.

## **2.1 How do other countries attempt to provide for the needs of all 14-16 year olds?**

Mainstream schooling provision in European countries (EU15 + Switzerland) usually provides for some curricular differentiation (in some cases in different institutions) in the final two years of secondary schooling but does not normally provide vocational courses leading to recognised vocational qualifications. However, some countries, Denmark and France for example, have provisions which allow for students who cannot 'fit' into secondary schooling after the age of 14/15 to spend part of their time in the workplace. Such exemptions from standard schooling are comparatively rare and used for perhaps one pupil in 100.

There has been much agreement among contributors to the seminars that the end of almost automatic transition from school to labour market in the early 1970s and the rise of youth unemployment caused disaffection to become a more pressing issue for teachers and schools – although not for policy makers – in the years that followed. In the German-speaking countries of Europe, and in Denmark where a similar dual system of vocational training operates, a smooth transition to dual system vocational training is still the norm for most students who do not follow the longer academic route.

The second of our six seminars included presentations on two countries' approaches to disaffection. The first, Switzerland, falls within the scope of the countries mentioned above where long-standing arrangements for entry to apprenticeship ensure that almost all young people experience a structured transition to the adult world of work. The second, by way of contrast, is the United States where disaffection is considered an important issue.

Whitburn (2003) pointed out that there is particular interest in the Swiss system because:

- A high proportion – two thirds - of Swiss youth gain vocational qualifications
- Unemployment for young people is very low
- There is a high GDP per head in Switzerland and the well-qualified workforce is thought to be a key factor in achieving this

- There is, arguably, evidence that the Swiss are better than many at motivating less academic learners.

### **2.1.1 Identified success factors**

The apparent success of the Swiss system was felt to be associated with four over-arching factors:

- The system maximises success rather than failure
- There are safety nets in the system at different stages
- No choices need to be made by students before they are able to make them
- Training and qualification routes are clear, widely understood and available to almost all students
- Children begin school relatively late, with the kindergarten stage being focused on play and developing pre-requisites for effective learning.

The Swiss (actually German-speaking Swiss) Cantons emphasise special care with the foundation of learning and differential pedagogy as a way of preventing disengagement and underachievement for students who do not attend the academic secondary schools. This translates into a more sheltered school environment (the same classroom and only a small number of different teachers at the secondary stage) and mastery of small learning steps. It is entirely consistent with the above, that Switzerland exhibits a different relationship between low participation and socio-economic class compared to the UK. In Switzerland it is the students from higher than average socio-economic backgrounds who are more likely to truant and students from lower than average socio-economic backgrounds are no more likely to do so than students with average socio-economic status. (OECD, 2003).

The other country considered is the United States. A majority of high school graduates leave school with either three or more vocational course credits or concentrated their courses in a single occupational area. However, these courses do not normally lead to a recognised vocational qualification.

Proportions of 18 year olds failing to gain a High School Diploma have remained fairly constant at around 30 per cent in the post-war period. Since the Diploma qualification is deliberately broad in its scope and requires as a minimum only a fairly basic level of knowledge and skill it could be assumed that quite a high proportion of those failing to gain a HS Diploma are in some way disengaged from learning and achieving below potential.

Cathy Stasz from Rand Europe described recent attempts to boost vocational education in the United States for all students.<sup>12</sup> Three types of organised vocational learning have been tried: Career Academies – a ‘school within a school’ approach which features dedicated teachers and a smaller number of students in a multi-year course of study

- High schools with clustered choices or pathways available at age 14/15 (5/6 pathways often available)
- High school with themes – a whole-school approach (similar to specialist schools in England)

These types of programmes aim to integrate academic and vocational learning within the vocationally-related career area and to incorporate teaching practices that may be more amenable to some learners, including less motivated or disaffected pupils.

The most reliable evaluations of these experiments are:

- a longitudinal study with a control group of students in Career Academies in California
- a randomised experimental study of Career Academies
- a quasi-experimental study of Career Magnet Schools in New York City

The randomized study of Career Academies indicated that, relative to the comparators, there were higher levels of both student and staff satisfaction with the career academy approach and better staff-student relationships. In both Career Academy studies, participating students showed improved attendance, reduced drop-out, higher graduation,

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<sup>12</sup> Stasz (2003).

and higher levels of college entry than non-participating students. Those who were assigned through lot to Career Magnet Schools were found to have developed a stronger occupational identity earlier and were better career planners.

Thus the evidence suggests that the alternative approaches have a range of gains in terms of motivation, re-engagement and commitment to further education, but not necessarily increased student achievement on traditional measures of this. These approaches also help create a more coherent and directed secondary school experience, which has been criticised for permitting students to haphazardly mix and match courses in ways that fail to relate to vocational goals.

### **3. Mapping the Consequences of Disengagement**

McIntosh (2003) used Labour Force Survey data to follow a pseudo cohort of young people from 1996 through to 2002.

At age 17-19 one fifth of the young men and 15 per cent of the young women reported having no GCSE passes and a further 9 per cent of young men and 8 per cent of young women had no passes above Grade D.<sup>13</sup>

By age 23-25

- 11 per cent have no qualifications of any kind
- 10 per cent gained either between 1 and 4 GCSE passes at Grade C or passes at Grades D-F but gained no further qualification/gained a vocational qualification which failed to improve on their GCSE level

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<sup>13</sup> Proportions claiming no GCSE passes are much higher in the LFS survey than proportions of the same cohorts recorded as having gained some GCSE passes (DfES SFR 35/1999). DfES statistics show only 8 per cent of the cohort with no GCSE passes. We could therefore conclude that nearly 20 per cent of those who report no GCSE passes in the LFS had, in fact, gained some passes. This means, first, that the situation of those with no qualifications is probably considerably worse than shown here, second, that low grades/numbers of GCSE passes are frequently discounted by those who gain them.



- 9 per cent gained 5 or more GCSE passes at Grades A-C and either gained no further qualification/gained vocational qualifications but failed to improve on their GCSE level

Of the men aged 23-35 with no school qualifications nearly a quarter were unemployed or inactive, the situation of young women with no school qualifications was considerably worse – 42 per cent were inactive and a further 5 per cent unemployed. GCSE passes below Grade C seem to lead to significantly improved employment prospects relative to those with no qualifications. Men with passes at Grades D-F were much less likely to be inactive than those with no qualifications and their unemployment rate was also lower. The situation of young women in this category was still very disturbing, with 30 per cent inactive and 6 per cent unemployed.

However, an important finding of this paper was that vocational qualifications at all levels can improve the employment chances of unqualified school leavers. Unqualified men who gained a vocational qualification at Level 2 had an employment rate similar to those who had gained 5 or more GCSE passes at Grades A-C. Unqualified young women who gained vocational qualifications at Level 2 or above also had much better employment chances. The main effect of vocational qualifications was on employment chances. Unqualified men who gained vocational qualifications did not reach the same wage level as the 5 or more GCSE Grades A-C group at the same vocational level.

This paper reveals the cost of disaffection and lack of engagement to individuals in terms of lost employment opportunities and lack of connection to the labour market. It also underlines the importance of a stronger vocational offer post-16 and preparation for this route and its opportunities pre-16.

### **Disengagement and disadvantage**

Schoon (2003) considered evidence from two longitudinal cohort studies, the NCDS (born 1958) and the BCS (born 1970).

The holistic approach adopted aims to integrate developmental and socio-economic factors to explain differences in educational outcomes when controlling for initial academic attainment.

Persistent socio-economic disadvantage results in an accumulation of risk factors which predispose towards poor school performance. Yet, in both cohorts some individuals have demonstrated the capacity to overcome adversity, and to show positive achievement and motivation in the face of that adversity, a phenomenon also described as resilience. There are three broad sets of variables operating as protective factors that may impede the impact of adverse experiences and enable the individual to fully develop his or her potential. These factors include

- attributes of the young people themselves
- characteristics of their families
- aspects of the wider social context

For those exposed to a large number of risk factors (socio-economic disadvantage), however, the proportion displaying resilient behaviour is relatively small.

While Schoon's paper emphasises the importance of early intervention she also stresses that every stage of the life course is important. In particular she points to the later years of transition at 16 as having an important effect on psychosocial development. For example, one of her findings is that in both cohorts *there is an increased risk effect during the transition from late childhood to adolescence, at age 16, when important decisions about future careers are made.* Clearly, this is a stage at which intervention could help to mitigate risk and boost resilience.

Schoon's study provides insight into the interactive process whereby the individual child develops attitudes and motivation to learn within a changing social context which he/she changes in the process. Modelling this process, the study suggests that the impact of social adversity on attainment can be almost halved by the introduction into the model of 'protective' factors. For the disadvantaged group teacher expectations, followed by own educational and job aspirations, parental aspirations and parental involvement are the most significant protective factors. The study also shows how some of these factors vary between the two cohorts, in particular own aspirations and parental aspirations for further education and occupation.

Thus, comparison of evidence from the two cohorts allows us to compare and contrast the aspirations of students and their parents (Figure 1).

It was found that educational and occupational aspirations have generally increased among the later born cohort – among the young people themselves as well as among their parents. While in NCDS only 10 per cent of young men from the most disadvantaged backgrounds wanted further education beyond minimum school leaving age, in BCS70 this has increased to 39 per cent of young men wanting further education. This compares to 80 per cent of young men from professional families in NCDS and 88 per cent in BCS70 with high educational aspirations. Thus the aspirations of young people in social classes IV and V have increased faster than the aspirations of social classes I and II (Figure 2).

This paper reminds us of the strong negative relationship between socio-economic disadvantage and educational attainment. Most of the young people with whom we are concerned in these seminars are likely to experience one or more of the variables associated with socio-economic disadvantage. The PISA study provides a sobering reminder that this effect is considerably stronger in the UK than in other European countries where income and welfare inequality is less pronounced.

In a final analysis, Schoon shows that regarding adult occupational attainment even highly competent (above average academic attainment and high aspirations) young men from less privileged backgrounds do not achieve to the same extent as their more privileged peers. Popular beliefs in equal opportunities and being rewarded for demonstrating abilities and competences will evaporate when young people begin to believe that their training or schooling is not leading to a career, when they attribute their failure to find work, or to enter a career, not to a lack of effort on their side but to circumstances beyond their control.

Although, as Schoon points out, it is never too late to intervene, the accumulation of risk factors throughout the school years points to the importance of early intervention. Schoon makes clear that ‘within school’ variables, in particular teacher expectations, have a positive effect on student

achievement,, but also parental encouragement and support for further education are important protective factors.

#### **4. Improving Engagement – What Works?**

We now turn to a number of papers that analysed what could be learnt about improving motivation and performance through intervention in the curriculum offering for 14-16 year olds. We reviewed evaluation of a range of experimental programmes introduced into Year 10 and Year 11 classes from the early 1990s onwards. It should be emphasised that evaluation of these initiatives was carried out under difficult circumstances (few proper comparator groups, no random assignment, difficulties in finding appropriate measures of progress).

From the evidence presented to us it became possible to identify two ends of a wide spectrum of disengagement. At one end of the spectrum we are concerned with students of good but underused potential whose interests are increasingly focused on the world outside school. These students can respond well when offered the chance to study to a demanding level (Level 2) in a vocational subject area – for example, engineering, health, hospitality studies. At the other end of the spectrum we are concerned with students who attend school infrequently if at all and whose basic skills are inadequate for the practical tasks of day to day living and employment. In between, we may identify a group that attends school fairly regularly but makes little effort to achieve and views the curriculum and school culture negatively.

We have estimated the whole ‘disengaged’ group to be at a maximum around one third of a cohort, at a minimum one fifth. An estimate from OFSTED identifies perhaps 10,000 individuals in any one cohort (between one and two per cent) who have, to all intents and purposes, lost contact with school between the ages of 14 and 16. Our survey of the evidence of evaluation of initiatives to meet the needs of the disengaged starts with evidence from a programme designed for this group and for others with severe problems with school attendance.

## **Initiatives aimed at permanently excluded/truanting students**

The OFSTED report quoted by John Mattick (Mattick, 2003) considered provision for a very disadvantaged group of some 10 000 in number at least, who appear not to be accessing learning at all on a regular and structured basis. For these, OFSTED concluded, provision was far too often unsatisfactory.

However, we also learnt more about the type of provision which had succeeded with these students in a paper from Kay Kinder and Sally Kendall (Kinder and Kendall, 2003)<sup>14</sup> They reported upon the evaluation of six alternative education initiatives (AEIs) which were aimed at young people who had been permanently excluded from school or were non-attenders for other reasons. Effectiveness was measured in terms of the AEIs' success in returning pupils to mainstream education, educational attainment, post-16 outcomes and reducing anti-social behaviour including offending.

All the AEIs focused on establishing relationships which were adult-like and based on respect, features which were often said to be lacking in mainstream educational environments. A further key feature was that they offered educational programmes which allowed young people to experience success, and these were strengthened by a safety net of pastoral support. In addition, they were sufficiently flexible to accommodate the changing needs and circumstances of the young people attending the projects.

Referral to AEIs was usually via a multi-agency or multi-disciplinary panel. The most common reason for a young person's referral to the AEI was that they had been permanently excluded from school, usually for some form of aggression, either towards peers or staff.

The AEIs were found to have a considerable measure of success with these difficult and disengaged young people, in the following ways:

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<sup>14</sup> See also Kendall, S., Kinder, K., Halsey, K., Fletcher-Morgan C., White R. and Brown, C. (2003). *An Evaluation of Alternative Education Initiatives* (DfES Research Report 403). London: DfES.

- Approximately half of all the young people registered at the AEIs during the evaluation were awarded some form of accreditation. This success was felt to be noteworthy given AEI youngsters' past educational performance.
- Young people themselves frequently noted a change in their attitude as a result of attending the AEI: they were more willing to learn, they were enjoying learning and furthermore, they were considering taking up other educational opportunities.
- Over three-quarters of youngsters interviewed reported an improvement in their behaviour, with half feeling that family relationships had improved, and over three-quarters reporting having better relationships with project staff than with those in school.
- The median attendance rate for all provisions was over 50 per cent, but rates varied across the AEIs. Attendance of nearly half of the sample was better during the course of the evaluation than it had been in the previous year.
- Across the six AEIs, more criminal offences were recorded during the intervention stage, but fewer young people were responsible for these. Self-reports on crime showed that, by the summer term, about three-quarters indicated a reduction in, or cessation of, offending activity, with only one in eight acknowledging an increase.
- There was a reduction in the number of young people who were unsure about their future progression routes. Young people's expectations and aspirations appeared to have become more realistic as a result of attending the AEIs. They also showed a more positive attitude to the future in relation to employment, college and training.

All the AEIs were monitoring student destinations, with the majority of those involved in the NFER study going on to education and training or employment. There was still a significant minority who had unknown destinations and there appeared to be a need for more careful monitoring of all AEI leavers, especially those leaving during the academic year. There was also the key question of the support available to students once they left the projects. Without this,

would the observed gains be maintained or built upon, or would these young people regress and be re-lost to the system?

### **Initiatives arising from the Disapplication of the National Curriculum at KS4 (1988)**

Lessons learnt and messages emerging from initiatives which enabled schools to innovate in the curriculum offered to KS4 students were reported on in four seminar papers from Andrew Watson (SWA Consulting), John Mattick (OFSTED) and Marian Morris (NFER) and David Hall and Carl Raffo (University of Manchester) (2003).<sup>15</sup>

Watson (2003) reported on evaluation of a variety of initiatives but concentrated principally on 21 Action Research Projects which ran from 1998-2000.

Principal findings were that

- Students started with very negative views of themselves, as well as their schools. Outcomes were very mixed even within the same projects. For example, some pupils made major strides in their motivation and attitudes, while others dropped out. Attitudes to the enhancements themselves improved, more than to the schools.
- Self-esteem seemed to rise because of the fresh start in vocational setting with other adults. The vocational setting is important – pupils react better to interaction with adults there than if adults come into their school. Regular feedback and encouragement is also crucial.
- Pupils have a low understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, and of options post-16. Their awareness is increased by involvement in the projects, rather more than through teacher inputs. Pupils enjoy early experience of post-16 learning styles (e.g. being ‘treated like adults’). Preparation for, induction to, and support during placements are also important determinants of success.

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<sup>15</sup> Education (National Curriculum) (Exceptions at Key Stage 4) Regulations (1998). These allowed up to two National Curriculum subjects (selected from Modern Foreign Languages, design and technology and science) to be disapplied. This enabled targeted students to follow an extended work-related learning programme that included such elements as work placements, vocational courses and key skills enhancements, with accreditation available via NVQ or GNVQs, key skill awards and/or local certificates.

- Unauthorised absences fell in KS4 Demonstration Projects, but there was a much more mixed picture with Action Research Projects. Results show there are no ‘quick fixes’ for improving behaviour – students need constant support, immediate feedback and constant vigilance – e.g. a daily review
- Average GCSE points scores were lower for the project group (16) than for the comparator group (19), and both much less than the average for all participating schools (28). However, there is much variation – highest score was 53 in the project group and 41 in the comparator group. Many more NVQ/GNVQs were awarded amongst the project group than amongst the comparator group, although this is not surprising as pupils need special dispensation to enter for them
- Best news on attainment for the projects is the proportion leaving school with no nationally accredited awards – 12 per cent in 1999/2000 of the project group, which is only slightly higher than the average for all participating schools (11 per cent). Figure for the comparator group was 16 per cent
- In terms of distance travelled, in 8 of the projects, value added in the project group was greater than in the comparator group. In 4 of these, value added in the project group was also higher than the national median. An early award (e.g. a First Aid certificate) was seen as a useful motivator for further attainment. Also important to keep targets simple, e.g. one NVQ unit at a time
- Fewer in the project group went into full-time education or government training post-16, compared to the comparator group. More in the project group go into employment or the ‘other/not settled’ category than the comparator group. Students tend to follow related paths post-16. For example, if they do a hairdressing placement they often stay in hairdressing post-16, since they have found a field they can survive in

Marian Morris (NFER) has also been involved in evaluation of a number of KS4 government initiatives beginning with the *Education (National Curriculum) (Exceptions at Key Stage 4) Regulations* (1998). Morris (2003) reported that these new Regulations were widely welcomed but very variably implemented, with different numbers and groups of students participating in different schools. Earlier evaluation evidence from NFER and other sources showed that some schools interpreted the new freedoms liberally and concentrated their efforts on developing



young peoples' basic and life skills, sometimes without a great deal of employment-related input<sup>16</sup>. The regulations were extended in 2000 to enable schools to have further flexibility to emphasise skills development and to consolidate the learning of students for whom this was perceived as a need.

Although adopting different methodologies, the impacts identified by the NFER evaluation had a fair degree of consistency with those of Andrew Watson and colleagues. The NFER team found that, **for schools**, the main outcomes were:

- the legitimisation and further development of existing practices with less academic young people
- improved curricular flexibility, allowing schools to introduce a greater diversity of learning opportunities and strengthen the status of work-related learning in their curriculum
- more inclusive provision with greater external input
- less disruption in lessons

**For students**, as Andrew Watson's findings show, and especially for low-achieving pupils with low self-esteem, the new programmes were felt to have:

- Improved motivation, behaviour and attendance and reduced levels of exclusion
- Increased preparedness for, and confidence in post-16 progression
- Improved attainment

The evaluation also raised some concerns:

- The concept of disapplication *per se* had often been viewed unfavourably (and, in some cases, had been subverted by schools).

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<sup>16</sup> Nelson, J., Morris, M., Rickinson, M., Blenkinsop, S. and Spielhofer, T. (2001). *Disapplying National Curriculum Subjects to Facilitate Extended Work-related Learning at Key Stage 4: an Evaluation* (DfES Research Report 293). London: DfES.

- Selection of students was often seen as a remedial measure for disengaged pupils, not as a positive alternative to the existing curriculum.
- Placement opportunities were often restricted and the work-related learning potential was not always fulfilled.
- There were logistical problems, including timetabling and transport issues.
- There was a differential impact on young people; the programmes were not so effective with the most disengaged, or those with acute or entrenched personal problems.

Mattick (2003) reported on the OFSTED perspective on school initiatives taken under these same 1998 Regulations. A survey of work related learning undertaken 1998 - 2000 and published by OFSTED in 2001 indicated that where work-related learning is connected to vocational qualifications, and well managed, it is associated with improvements in attainment by a proportion of learners.<sup>17</sup> The work also found that attendance of around half of young people involved improved, and this at an age where attendance typically declines.

An inspection of curriculum provision and its effects at Key Stage 4 (students age 14-16) published in 2003 explored the curriculum, variations in it and its effects on attainment, progress and retention.<sup>18</sup>

Inspection involved mainstream secondary schools, provision at a number of special schools, some pupil referral units and some pupils attending colleges or work based learning providers. It saw in the finesse of some key stage 4 curriculum planning in schools, opportunities created where learners with aptitude in languages or performing arts or science increased the proportion of their curriculum in these fields, and achieved, sometimes strongly, above prediction. Effective planning could contribute to releasing potential of some young people through work related or vocational emphasis in the curriculum.

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<sup>17</sup> Extending Work related learning at Key stage 4, Ofsted 2001, reference HMI276.

<sup>18</sup> Key Stage 4: towards a flexible curriculum, June 2003, HMI 517.

This report, albeit with relatively small quantities of pupil-level achievement data, broadly confirmed previous findings, that well configured work placements might indeed contribute to re-engagement and improving performance.

### **Initiatives 1992 onwards to promote courses 14-16 leading to recognised qualifications in vocational subjects**

GNVQ Part 1 Courses were first piloted in schools in 1995. OFSTED published its final report on this pilot in 1999.<sup>19</sup> John Mattick's paper summarised the main findings as follows

The report emphasised that:

- ... the (GNVQ) course is highly motivating for the great majority of students taking it
- that between less than 60 per cent and up to 80 per cent of work (according to discipline) was satisfactory
- the ...courses.. had a beneficial impact on students' ability to cope with the demands of independent working (post-16) but worryingly,
- despite the fact that they are well motivated by the course, too many students at both levels (intermediate and foundation) failed to achieve the award or gain unit accreditation.

OFSTED also carried out evaluative work from 1996 onwards of GCSE courses in subjects that had a vocational dimension – even though not necessarily formulated with vocational learning as a central aim - (loosely 'Vocational GCSE'). The area was investigated quantitatively by comparing pupil attainments and using comparator subjects. The work found that some young people were highly motivated by the vocational strand in their curriculum and achieved their best grade in a vocational subject but that these subjects were not 'easy options'. Those young people

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<sup>19</sup> Part One General National Vocational Qualification Pilot: Final Report, Ofsted (1999) ISBN 0113501056.

who were attaining least in school were unlikely to attain markedly better in these GCSE courses than in much of what they attempted.

Justin Donovan, Head of Lifelong Learning, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham presented evidence which showed outstanding overall progress in the Borough following the introduction of single-subject Vocational GCSE courses in Engineering, Printing, Construction, Catering, and Theatre and Performance Design. The introduction of these courses pre-dates the government's initiatives in this field.

Donovan (2003) showed that between 1992, when Vocational GCSEs were first introduced and 2002, the percentage gaining five or more GCSEs at grades A-C in Barking and Dagenham rose from one third to one half of all 16 year olds in comprehensive schools, a far steeper rise than for other similar authorities.

On the implementation of the initiative, Donovan stressed the following points

- the courses were introduced gradually following a great deal of curriculum development work
- infrastructure (availability of specialised teachers, links with local employers for work placements) is fragile and lacks a wider institutional framework
- Single subject vocational GCSEs avoids socially and academically divisive choices by allowing students who wish to take a large number of subjects at GCSE to include a vocational GCSE without dropping other subjects

Donovan stressed that Vocational GCSE courses were not considered suitable for students with very irregular attendance, severe discipline issues and/or difficulties with basic skills. These students, while frequently disaffected and having negative attitudes to school were thought to have fallen so far behind as to require special courses/measures which were provided in a number of out-of-school locations as well as in schools themselves.

Although a strong case could be made out for a link between the introduction of vocational GCSEs and the rapid improvement at KS4 in Barking and Dagenham, there is currently no

scientifically-based evidence for such a link. It should be noted that B&D has introduced other measures at the same time as introducing vocational GCSEs which may also have contributed to the Borough's success.

### **The Increased Flexibilities Programme (IFP)**

As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, the DfES 2002 Green Paper, *'14-19: Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards'* acknowledged that there was still a major job to do in re-engaging some young people, and this led to the development of the Increased Flexibilities Programme, which built upon the experience of the previous National Curriculum regulations focusing on disapplication. The element of the programme which introduced GCSEs in vocational subjects built upon previous experience of the Part 1 GNVQ in schools. The Increased Flexibilities Programme (IFP) is aimed at *'14-16 year olds of all abilities who can benefit most'*, and has two clear attainment targets:

- 1 a third of pupils achieving at least one GCSE A\* to C in a vocational subject, over and above their predicted GCSEs
- 2 a third achieving at least one approved NVQ at Level 1, over and above their predicted GCSEs,

and two other expected outcomes:

- 3 attendance rates of the young people matching those for the key stage 4 cohort
- 4 three-quarters of pupils progressing into further education or training.

As Mattick points out, current survey work of the Increased Flexibility Programme is too new and its effects unproven to make reliable comments about it. There is early evidence that a broad range of students value opportunities to study for a diversified range of qualifications, within a broad and balanced curriculum, and to pursue areas that accord with their ambitions and career interests. The programme is about mainstream provision and hence any effects it has on reducing the likelihood that young people will disengage from learning will be indirect rather than the

focus of its core purposes, which are to support the introduction of new GCSEs in vocational subjects and develop the use of other vocational qualifications and work related learning.

Marian Morris leads the NFER evaluation of this programme. This is a mixed methodological, longitudinal study which has published one set of findings, based on survey data from over 1200 schools and nearly 29,000 students, matched with national dataset evidence<sup>20</sup>. This is a baseline profile of the schools and students involved in the Programme and showed how the local IFP partnerships (involving schools with college and business partners) were interpreting the target group – *‘those who can benefit most’*.

Morris (2003) reports that, compared to schools nationally, IFP schools were more likely to be 11-16 schools, with lower levels of key stage 3 and 4 attainment and had higher levels of young people in receipt of free school meals.

The profile of participating students was skewed towards males, those from white backgrounds, disadvantaged young people, lower attainers and those with some level of SEN. More females were taking the new GCSEs in vocational subjects, and more males taking other vocational qualifications, with some stereotypic choices of subject still being apparent. Amongst the participants, there were also differences in prior attainment, with higher achievers more likely to be following the new GCSE courses and the less able more likely to be pursuing an NVQ or other vocational option. *Thus the Programme appears to be opening up new qualification routes to those who would not necessarily have fared well in traditional vocational pathways, but, at the same time seems to be introducing or maintaining certain differentials*

The first round of survey data is in the process of statistical analysis and will be reported later this year. Key questions focus on any association between young people's experiences of the Programme and work-related learning and their:

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<sup>20</sup> Golden, S., Nelson, J., O'Donnell, L. and Morris, M. (2003). *National Evaluation of the Increased Flexibility for 14-16 Year Olds Programme* (DfES Research Brief RBX 11-03). London: DfES.

- attitudes to school
  - preferred learning styles
  - development of work-related skills, such as punctuality and working as a team
  - development of personal and social skills, such as self-confidence and motivation
- plans for the future - what is the influence of vocational qualifications and IFP on young people's post-16 choices?

As far as outcomes are concerned, comparisons will be made between the relative key stage 4 outcomes obtained by the treatment group and all young people in their year group in the same school and all Year 10 pupils nationally, controlling the background characteristics etc. One significant challenge will be with respect to the attainment of qualifications for which there is no GCSE equivalent, but, as far as the two attainment targets for the programme are concerned, impact can be measured in terms of:

- Whether pupils who participate in the IFP achieve higher average or total GCSE points than those who do not pursue the IFP, after adjusting for key stage 3 ability.
- Whether pupils who choose to undertake vocational GCSEs achieve higher average or total GCSE points than those who choose other vocational qualifications, after adjusting for ability at key stage 3.
- Whether pupils pursuing different vocational areas (e.g. 'practical' or 'service-related' vocational qualifications) achieve different average or total GCSE points after adjusting for ability at key stage 3.

Some of the other target outcomes are faced with more difficult issues with respect to data access. There remains, however, as yet, the overarching question:

*Does taking part in pre-16 vocational studies re-engage or motivate young people to post-16 learning and prepare young people adequately for post-16 study?*

## **The student voice**

In order to really answer this, there is a need to obtain the voice of the young people and the IFP evaluation will be doing so via questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. The NFER has also undertaken a micro-level study, funded under the *Skills for All Research* programme using interviews with students in a number of FE colleges (McCrone and Morris, 2004). Main findings from this study are that:

- All 17 of the young people interviewed observed that the pre-16 vocational courses undertaken had changed their attitudes towards education post-16 in a positive way. Most believed the vocational experience had contributed to their decision on their educational routes post-16. They reported that the vocational courses had eased their transition to post-16 studies at college and had helped to clarify career paths.
- The pre-16 courses had also raised the aspirations of at least six of the young people. They reported that, prior to undertaking the pre-16 vocational courses, they had intended to leave school aged 16 and get a job. However, having experienced pre-16 vocational courses, they then pursued post-16 studies at college
- Sixteen young people said they were motivated by the content of their pre-16 vocational courses, as well as being stimulated by the practical nature of the work.
- Students also appreciated having more individual attention and more group work at college.
- The young people said they preferred the college environment mainly because they felt they were treated more like adults and had more respect from their tutors.
- Nine young people believed their attendance had improved and ten students reported that their behaviour was better while they were on their pre-16 course. While some of this could, at least in part, have been due to maturation, they felt that it was largely due to observing more mature behaviour at college and subsequently conforming. There was, however, limited evidence that improved attendance and behaviour exhibited by the young people at college transferred back to college.
- College staff believed that the two main benefits of the pre-16 vocational courses were that they were an effective marketing tool for the college and, from the students' perspective, they eased progression to post-16 courses.

## **Conclusions**

### **Disengaged and achieving below potential and/or failing to master basic skills: what have we learnt about this group?**

Disengagement is not new, but changes in the demand for skills, and the importance of lifelong learning together with a more inclusive employment and social agenda have made it a high



priority policy area. There is an extensive body of academic research which documents the effect of negative attitudes to school on attitudes to further learning (Payne, 2002). However, estimating the size of the challenge presented by disengagement and distinguishing the variety of needs of those in this group is still under-researched. Nevertheless, we feel that, from our seminar papers and discussions, some improved understanding has been achieved.

The disengaged who cause immediate concern are located within the group that achieve less than five GCSE passes at A\*-C grades at 16. A very small group, the 'out of touch', (1-2 per cent) have practically lost touch with school between 14 and 16. A larger group, difficult to estimate, but possibly to be identified with the roughly 20 per cent of the cohort who *claim* to have no GCSE qualifications at age 17/18/19 could be characterised as the 'disaffected but in touch' group. This group will include the truanting group but, for the rest are mostly still in touch with school. Some may be in danger of failing to reach basic skills standards necessary for any further education and/or training – others may be capable of achieving GCSE passes at Grades A-C. A further group, also difficult to quantify but perhaps close to the proportion who gain one or more but less than five Grade C or higher passes at GCSE would account for up to a further 20 per cent. Within this third group whom we will characterise as the '1-4 A-C Grade' group, some may have reached their full potential but others will be capable of much more if interest and enthusiasm can be aroused.

A vast amount of experimentation has taken place as a result of initiatives taken by the previous government and, after 1997, by the current government. Unfortunately, none of this was planned and implemented in such a way as to provide robust evidence of the efficacy of any particular type of provision. Nevertheless, from our survey of evaluation of initiatives targeted at the disengaged it has become clearer that these client groups, although difficult to distinguish at the margin, do require different approaches in order to achieve in basic skills and/or achieve their potential.

The small 'out of touch' group appears to make some progress in alternative provision which provides one to one contact, an adult approach and atmosphere and the opportunity to mark

progress through certification. However, success on even the best of these programmes is limited and OFSTED have expressed deep concern about variability in quality of provision.

The larger ‘disaffected but in touch’ group appears to respond to a wide range of initiatives which often share the characteristic of taking them out of school whether into a work-related setting (FE college, employers’ premises) or a setting associated with leisure and cultural activities (football club, theatre). However their response was by way of general animation rather than the securing of material benefits. Progress was mixed as were experiences of work placements, etc., there was no ‘magic bullet’ and, where outcomes were assessed, there was mixed evidence on improved attainment and progression to further education and training. If anything, contact with the world outside school appeared to increase the probability that students would choose to leave rather than stay.

OFSTED was cautious on this type of intervention, stressing the need for careful planning and monitoring of work placements – evaluation had shown that many were not suitable and some could be quite damaging. With this proviso, and based on relatively small quantities of pupil-level achievement data, OFSTED considered that well configured work placements might indeed contribute to re-engagement and improving performance. The understandable lack of expertise in teaching basic number and literacy amongst staff in these ‘alternative’ settings, coupled with the absence of these pupils for some regular timetabled classes in these subjects as a result of their attending their ‘alternative’ activities, must raise concern that some of the necessary foundations for further education and training could be neglected to the considerable detriment of the students.

The third client group identified, the ‘1-4 A-C Grade’ has been targeted throughout the 1990s by pilots and initiatives which focused on changing the mix of subjects studied 14-16 to include vocational subjects. The thinking behind these initiatives proposed that vocational subjects would re-engage students’ interests at a period in their development when they were focusing on future roles in the adult world of work. Vocational subjects would also be in tune with hobbies and out of school interests and allow students to demonstrate aptitudes and capabilities that were not called upon in the more ‘academic’ subjects.

Many difficult challenges have to be overcome in providing such courses, as is shown by the experience of Barking & Dagenham. OFSTED expressed concern about the capacity of schools to offer such courses to the standard required (lack of teachers with requisite vocational experience/skills) when evaluating GNVQ in 1999. Nevertheless, starting with the introduction of GNVQ Part 1 in the mid-1990s and Vocational GCSEs in Barking & Dagenham, the overall judgement has been that such courses can have a highly motivating effect on students performance. Systematic and robust evaluation of the impact of studying vocational subjects on student motivation, achievement and progress has been lacking. It is too early to learn from the IFP programme of evaluation but it should eventually provide some of the hard evidence that has been lacking until now.

### **Concerns and questions**

What are the concerns raised from this overview? Doubts were expressed about the underlying assumption that work-related learning [aimed principally at the ‘disaffected but in touch’ group] is inherently more motivating for young people switched off by the existing curriculum. Could it be that the real issue is one that is more to do with pedagogical style, learning preferences and the provision of adequate support? This hypothesis is worthy of testing. We learned from the earlier paper on the Swiss experience, for instance, that less academic youngsters appeared to flourish more routinely in Swiss schools where the curriculum was broadly-based for longer, was more nurturing in delivery style and had more safety nets built into the system

It was argued that nothing that we have heard in the seminars offers a cast iron way forward for the ‘disaffected but in touch’ group targeted by work-place learning measures, but that it is not clear that any other country has a foolproof method either. The danger is that of conflating these two different groups [the ‘disaffected but in touch’ group and the ‘1-4 Grade C’ group].

For the ‘1-4 Grade C’ group, there may be something of a magic bullet; namely better vocational options, which many countries offer as sizeable programmes of 3 years duration or more,

apparently to good effect, leading many to Level 3, whereas considerable numbers of this group in the UK spend only one year post-compulsory with no advancement on their Level 1 at GCSE.

For the second, the ‘disaffected but in touch’ it is not clear at present that there is an obvious solution or what it might be if it exists. The danger that threatens in the policy field is to apply the solution for the ‘1-4 Grade C’ group (better vocational options) to the ‘disaffected but in touch’, with the result both that it doesn’t work for them (because no simple recipe will) and that it is discredited for the ‘1-4 Grade C’ group by association with the disaffected.

We would be in a better position today to understand the ‘disaffected but in touch’ group and what works for them if a smaller number of initiatives had been introduced during the period of experimentation, with provision for robust, scientifically-based programmes of evaluation.

Much concern is expressed about the under-achievement of boys relative to girls. However, the McIntosh paper pointed to disastrous marginalisation/exclusion from the labour market of young women with no GCSE qualifications. The outcome for young women in this group was considerably worse than for young men. Are 14-16 girls, particularly those having difficulties with basic skills, benefiting to the same extent as 14-16 boys from interventions to raise achievements?

It was found, both in the US and in England, that while motivation of groups targeted by work-related initiatives frequently improved, they failed to show consistent improvement on standard measures of achievement (eg GCSE points scores). Can motivation/engagement improve and yet not be translated into increased effort and therefore improved performance? Or has performance improved but the improvement not been captured (if assessments not fit for purpose, for example)? Does the range of assessments used to try to capture improvement need to be broadened?

The OECD PISA study showed even our poor-performers scoring better than their counterparts in a number of other countries. Yet it is highly probable that half the English students scoring at Level 3 on the PISA tests may fail to gain a Grade C GCSE pass in English (the ONS show a .8

correlation between PISA score and GCSE English A\*-C so we map directly across from PISA to GCSE). Are we setting the bar too high too early? What is it about five GCSEs anyway (the National Targets started out with four)? Other countries with a more socially equitable distribution of educational achievement, for example the Scandinavian countries, do not set a formidable hurdle at 16. Denmark and Sweden have lower average scores on PISA than the UK (largely because they have fewer very high achievers at 15 than the UK). However, a far higher proportion subsequently gain a Level 3 qualification.

Can we move more quickly towards de-coupling KS4 assessment from GCSE and encouraging a variation in length of preparation for GCSE? Or, for example could we demand the same standards as now obtain at C+ for the aspects of maths and English which are vital for future life (for example probability, writing letters) but be less insistent on all achieving the grade for things like geometry and English literature? Fewer 'failing' ie not getting 5 A\*-C would mean less disaffection and discouragement.

McIntosh (op.cit.) showed how vocational qualifications can improve the employment chances of the group with no GCSE qualifications. At the moment we think that too many in this group are 'turned off' learning and that means that we need to continue to work at all the challenges raised by disaffection. But this is not the only problem, as our poor record relative to other countries in post-16 qualification demonstrates. Some of the reasons for failure to progress are to be found in labour market characteristics and lack of transparent routes. However, from discussion at the seminars it appears that many of the disengaged lack information about post-16 qualifications, training and subsequent labour market opportunities.

Careers guidance and information on training and education routes to chosen occupations appear to still be a major weakness. Starting from a presentation by Deirdre Hughes (Hughes, 2003), there was general consensus that the Connexions service is having difficulty in meeting both mainstream and more specialist needs of young people<sup>21</sup>. It was not clear what the considerable resources devoted to Connexions were 'buying'. There was a strong feeling that the Connexions service is trying to do too much and not meeting any need fully. These complaints have been

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<sup>21</sup> Hughes (2003).

made - particularly in regard to information on further education and training opportunities supplied by schools - for at least the last twenty years. What do we need to do to make more progress on this front?

Historical evidence (technical secondary schools, TVEI) show vocational/technical subjects and programmes as being particularly vulnerable to pressures to academicize content, to problems of quality and the absence of natural champions ie employers and trade unions. The papers which touched on Vocational GCSE (Barking & Dagenham) and the OFSTED Final Report on GNVQ Part 1 pilots also hinted at the fragility of the supporting infrastructure and problems of maintaining high quality learning experiences<sup>22</sup>. They also stressed the importance of ensuring that teachers have appropriate vocational experience and skills and the opportunity to make links with employers in relevant occupational areas. What safeguards are in place to ensure that the GCSE in vocational subjects initiative is supported by high quality appropriate course content and taught by appropriately qualified teachers? How is the need for equipment and resources to provide for the practical elements in GCSE in vocational subjects being met? Can we be sure that this technical/vocational initiative will finally receive the sustained support necessary for survival?

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<sup>22</sup> OFSTED (1999).

## Parental hopes and expectations for further education by social class

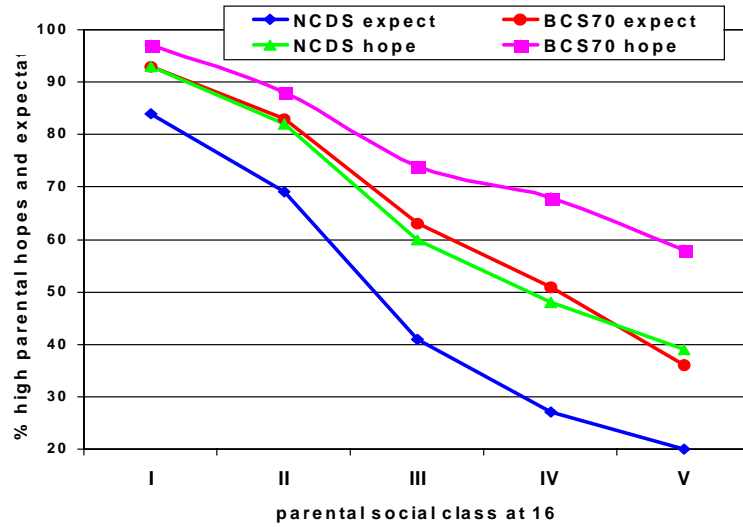


Figure 1

## The Aspiration Gradient: Teenage aspirations by parental social class

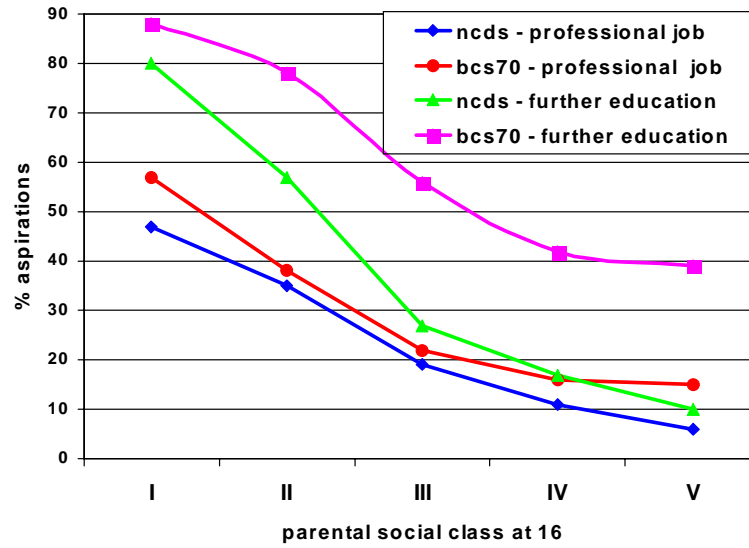


Figure 2



Appendix A : UK government Initiatives assessed in papers presented to the seminar series

DATE STARTED/DURATION	TARGET GROUP	INITIATIVE TITLE	TYPE OF PROVISION	WHERE PROVIDED	PAPER FROM
1992-	Those aiming for some A*-C GCSE	Barking & Dagenham	Vocational GCSE	Schools	Justin Donovan
1998 - 2000	Students who dropped up to two National Curriculum subjects (selected from Modern Foreign Languages, design and technology and science)	Education (National Curriculum) (Exceptions at Key Stage 4) Regulations (1998) Includes Action Research Projects	Vocational courses, basic skills, work-related placements, options	Schools, colleges, workplaces	Marian Morris Andrew Watson John Mattick
1998/1999 and 1999/2000		Standards Funds Projects	Work-related learning		Andrew Watson
1998/99 and 1999/2000		Education Action Zones	Work-related components		Andrew Watson
????	Young offenders and those excluded from school	Alternative Education Initiatives	Mentoring, basic skills help, careers counselling, vocational certificates	Not in formal educational settings	Kay Kinder
2002-	<i>'14-16 year olds of all abilities who can benefit most</i>	Increased Flexibilities Programme (IFP)	GCSE in a vocational subject NVQ at Level 1	Schools, colleges	John Mattick Marian Morris

## Appendix B: Seminar speakers

Valerie Bayliss	Educational consultant, formerly DfES
Justin Donovan	Barking and Dagenham LEA
Ken Franklin	Sheffield College, formerly DfES
David Hall	University of Manchester
Deirdre Hughes	University of Derby
Kay Kinder	NFER
Richard Layard	CEP, LSE, formerly DfES
Steve McIntosh	CEP LSE and Skills for All Programme
John Mattick	OFSTED
David Miliband MP	Minister of State for School Standards
Marian Morris	NFER
Carlo Raffo	University of Manchester
William Richardson	University of Exeter
Andreas Schleicher	OECD
Ingrid Schoon	City University
Cathy Stasz	Rand Europe
Hilary Steedman	CEP, LSE
Sheila Stoney	NFER
Andrew Watson	ASW Consulting, formerly SWA Consulting
Julia Whitburn	NIESR

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