



Investigating Factors That Support Re-Engagement of 14 - 16 Year Olds in Education

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Abstract

This review of literature applied a comprehensive approach to corroborate and/or contradict the findings of previous research that has been disseminated to education practitioners. Disengagement from school amongst 14 - 16 year olds has become a recurrent phenomenon, thus identifying and implementing timely interventions to address it should be a key aim for schools. This paper therefore examines previous literature on the subject matter. It investigates factors that could help to break down the barriers to learning and which could inspire affected learners to re-focus on learning and achieve. A thorough and methodical search strategy using Google and Google Scholar was used to locate relevant literature for the research and this yielded the following resources: online research reports and publications, research journals, BERJ (*British Educational Research Journal*), NFER (*National Foundation for Educational Research*) and DFE (Department for Education) websites, media and trade union publications, the University of Greenwich library and electronic resources. All similarities on the subject matter were compiled, examined and applied to a critical review of re-engagement. The last step was to examine their implications and applications at school level.

Keywords

14 - 16 Year Olds, Key Stage Four, Disaffected & Disengaged, NEET, 14 - 19 Education & Training

Subject Areas: Education, Sociology

1. Introduction

The lack of motivation to learn and low aspiration for the future amongst 14 - 16 year olds is worrying. This kind of concern has been highlighted by Ross [1] who stated that “young people’s disengagement from school

has long been a policy priority for Western governments”. In the reform report for 14 - 19 Education and Training, Tomlinson [2] identified rekindling the passion for learning as a key priority. Tomlinson’s report seemed to have sparked off a fresh kind of interest amongst stakeholders on 14 - 19 education and training. The introduction of various alternative programmes designed to provide opportunities for a more hands-on approach to learning have been applauded, yet, experience from practice indicate that there are more fundamental issues to be addressed. These issues are some of the factors that contribute to the disengagement of young people from school/learning; and given the potential cost of disengagement both to the individual and society, it makes sense to adopt a multi-dimensional approach to curbing the phenomenon.

Students at the verge of disengagement often arrive for classes with “emotional baggages” and no meaningful learning takes place until such matters are discussed and resolved (at least temporarily). So a large chunk of lesson time is spent trying to solve personal problems that, though unrelated to the lesson, cannot be ignored. The crux of the matter is that these young people experience difficulties in their personal lives; they require interventions that will help them overcome the challenges they face before any meaningful education, training or employment can take place.

2. Literature Review

There are growing concerns that the number of learners disengaging from school at Key Stage 4 has been on the increase in recent years [3]. This fact is highlighted by evidence from schools, colleges, government, and surveys carried out on 14 - 16 year olds. These are students who are at risk of disengaging or have disengaged from mainstream school. Ross [1] identified two categories: those who are disengaged from school but not education and those who are disengaged from both. Various publications in the literature on student disengagement and insights from working with this group of students highlight the exhibition of negative attitudes to learning and lack of consideration for the future as risk factors. Why the exhibition of negative attitudes to learning? What are the underlying factors?

According to McIntosh & Houghton [4] this has huge socio-economic implications for the young people as well as wider society and must be tackled.

A number of studies carried out by Cullen *et al.* [5], Lumby [6] [7], Evans *et al.* [8], Britton *et al.* [9], Johnson *et al.* [10], Callanan *et al.* [11] Ross [2], Ferguson *et al.* [12] and Bielby *et al.* [13] have identified factors responsible for student disengagement from school/education. These range from the experiences they have about school to socio-economic factors. These researchers agree that the school experience borders on the non-effective, as a result of a combination of influences, including the nature of the curriculum and the poor relationship between learners, their teachers and support staff. This poor relationship may be triggered by rules and regulations in school which the young people perceive as being too rigid and unfair.

These researchers tend to argue that the National Curriculum is failing to engage a number of learners who see dropping out of mainstream school/learning as the only option. The National Curriculum is considered as lacking diversity in the provision of educational opportunity as the majority of courses/subjects do not suit the needs and aptitudes of different types of learners. ATL [14] also agrees that the prescriptive nature of the curriculum is responsible for this lack of diversity—this includes the definition of a body of essential knowledge/skills, the specification of subjects and entitlements, and a detailed course of study which students must follow within each of the entitlement areas. As Goodson [15] puts it:

“A frequent cause of failure seems to be that the course is often based on the traditional belief that there is a body of content for each separate subject which every school leaver should know. In the least successful courses this body of knowledge is written into the curriculum without any real consideration of the needs of the boys and girls and without any question of its relevance.”

As failure translates into a lack of motivation, the complexities are also exacerbated by the streaming-by-ability system which results in creating an ingrained feeling of inadequacy as students transit into Key Stage 4. And for Haywood *et al.* [16],

“The emphasis schools place on academic achievement and measuring by test results and levels of qualification can result in feelings of anxiety and fear that can be managed by dropping out of the education system.”

They identified flexible teaching approaches and cited role modelling as important factors that encourage re-engagement.

Whilst Lumby, [6] supports the modification of the curriculum and pedagogic practices, Chapman [17] argues that it is the removal of curriculum responsibility from teachers and the pressure to meet targets that has led to

failure in calibrating learning to engage the interest of students. However, Solomon and Rogers [18] believe that there is not much evidence to support the claim that the curriculum is unsuitable for this group of young people. Rather they attribute it to “a deficiency in motivational and coping strategy”, thus suggesting that there are other concerns outside the curriculum. On the other hand, government believes that the curriculum particularly at Key Stage four is the problem; hence the 14 - 19 reform and recently the Wolf Report [19]. As Gove (former Secretary of State for Education) points out in his foreword to the Wolf Report, “far too many 14 - 16 year olds are doing courses with little or no value....” [19]. Similarly, Robinson [20] is convinced that the curriculum is responsible for the phenomenon of student disengagement and advocates for a more personalised curriculum.

Interestingly however, Willms [21] noted that,

“Longitudinal research on child development suggests that there is a core set of risk factors, including poverty, poor temperament, cognitive problems, learning disabilities and physical and mental handicaps that is evident in many children when they enter school. Children who display behaviour problems or cognitive deficits during the early years of schooling are vulnerable, in the sense that without concerted and prolonged intervention their chances of succeeding at school or leading healthy and productive lives are diminished”.

The salient point here is that the problem of disengagement is a multifaceted one that must be dealt with accordingly. The risk factors described above are further compounded by a curriculum that is perceived to be failing in serving students’ different interests and abilities. The consequence is the stifling of learner creativity and the denial to teachers of the flexibility needed to respond to student learning needs. Whilst a national curriculum is beneficial in creating benchmarks for schools and uniformity in the basic skills acquired by learners, genuine interests and emerging talents must not be ignored.

2.1. Re-Engaging the Disengaged: A Relevant and Flexible Curriculum

Findings from research reports on students’ experiences from the perspective of the curriculum and the majority of literature reviewed highlight the fact that young people perceive relevance to future work and enjoyment of subjects or courses as reasons to engage or disengage in learning (Evans *et al.* [8]; Daniels *et al.* [22]. As noted by Howard [23], “Students want to know how what they are learning ‘fits’ into the real world, as well as how it fits into their own frame of reference”. Therefore the question of relevance in the curriculum is crucial. It is a critical factor in sustaining students’ interest and motivation to learn and achieve. Research carried out by OECD [24] [25] has established a strong link between enjoyment and attainment; it reveals that interest in a particular subject and being intrinsically motivated influences students’ engagement in learning and the extent to which learning takes place. Evidence from practice also points to the fact that students are more responsive to a curriculum that focuses adequately on issues of relevance to them and that which reflects the culture in which they live. This is supported by proponents of progressive education, such as Dewey and Rousseau [26] who believe that education ought to recognise a child’s prior learning, interests and talents and fit in learning to meet these needs.

The decision on what is regarded as essential knowledge requires careful consideration in order not to emphasise particular knowledge, content and skills at the expense of other skills-based knowledge. The key to achieving this lies in developing a flexible and adaptive curriculum that will accommodate the diverse needs of learners.

To avoid making poor choices for the future, it is important that students are given advice and guidance to choose subjects that they are happy doing as well as those that will help them work towards their career choice.

Empirical evidence suggests that countries which tailor the curriculum to the needs and interests of students have little or no room for disengagement. An example is Germany which runs a dual system that tracks and caters for students based on interest and abilities; the success of the system is said to be responsible for the low youth unemployment figures in the country (Hoeckel and Schwartz [27]; Steedman [28]).

Whilst the coalition government have taken steps to create alternative pathways and offer a more appropriate curriculum to 14 - 16 year old learners who struggle with the academic nature of the school curriculum [18], the key still lies in adopting a holistic approach by identifying and tackling other underlying factors.

In addition to alternative pathways, students who disengage from school but not learning can be offered flexible learning options that are geared towards employability training. This is supported by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) who, in a survey of 29 secondary schools, found [29] that “at Key Stage 4, a high quality, flexible curriculum, involving a range of accredited training providers outside the school, was effective in en-

gaging students more in their learning”.

The learning options have been successfully implemented in Australia [30]. It is an approach that works with students using flexible and individualised learning strategies.

2.2. A Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

A teaching strategy that is culturally responsive has been identified as that which fits into the “attributes, characteristics, or knowledge from students’ cultural background” [22]. It is seen to play an important role in creating an enabling environment for learning, thereby raising achievement [22]. Thus, in a heterogeneous society such as ours, it seems natural to acknowledge the role of culture in promoting engagement. But as Ball [31] noted, the National Curriculum, despite several reforms, does little to reflect cultural diversity. In fact, as observed previously, the 1988 reform resisted efforts to develop a multicultural curriculum in schools. It is somewhat contradictory that a multicultural society like ours is failing to acknowledge the role of culture in promoting learning. Similarly, Bishop and Glynn [32] noted that culture is a significant part of education that cannot be ignored by educators. They argue that it is not acceptable to structure mainstream educational contexts based on common culture, and educators themselves are ignorant of the fact that they bring their own traditions of meaning-making that are culturally generated to educational interactions. They state that incorporating multiculturalism in the curriculum is as important as assessing how a teacher’s cultural belief and practice affect students’ learning. Contributing to the subject, Howard [22] suggests that students who possess cultural knowledge that does not conform to mainstream approaches are more likely to “experience cognitive discomfort” as schools are engrossed with “mainstream ideology, language and norms”. He believes that culturally responsive teaching “actively engages students”, and in the case of a lack of interest, it acts “as a catalyst to develop personal interest”. The validity of Howard’s assertion is not in doubt, as experience has shown that culturally responsive teaching eliminates disenfranchisement and enhances the factors that seem to maximise the motivation to learn. On the other hand, Lumby [6] is of the view that adapting pedagogic practices is likely to reduce the monotony experienced by learners who do not engage with traditional methods of teaching thereby increasing more participation in the learning process.

2.3. Breaking down “Super Barriers”

Super barriers are critical non-school related risk factors that promote disengagement, particularly during the early adolescent years, and may not be resolved by school and curriculum reforms. Echoes from literature identify the following broad areas: challenges of the onset of puberty, living in distressed communities and instability in the family (Balfanz *et al.* [33]; Daniels *et al.* [21]). However, Webb *et al.* [34] believe that children as young as four years could be affected and “intervention” ought to be provided to the child early to avoid a “more costly intervention” in future. Within a one year pupil referral counselling service, they observed that “separation/divorce, family communication difficulties, family member with serious illness, domestic violence/abuse, developmental trauma, attachment difficulties, abuse and neglect, community trauma, making and sustaining friendships, victim of bullying and bullying instigator” ranked high on the list of barriers faced by the young people. Based on the positive results of the counselling services for children between the ages of eight and 11 in 28 schools, school-based counselling was therefore recommended as a cost effective intervention for primary schools.

For Evans *et al.* [7], “super barriers” to learning relate to being a young offender, strained relationships with family/friends and lack of finance to support oneself. Eva Benitez, a young offender and student at risk of disengagement, revealed the existence of these “super barriers” in *Freedom Writers* [35] in her comment to her teacher, “You don’t know the pain we feel... you got us in here teaching us this grammar shit...” Perhaps this is the basis for the lack of motivation and coping strategies referred to previously by Solomon and Rogers [17]. What other interventions could be appropriate for young people like Eva?

Appropriate family support is considered to be beneficial for student engagement and as Richards-Gray [36] has observed, the family is key to learning. She argues that working with parents provides a “reflective space that is needed to process complex emotional difficulties” and concludes that “a child needs a whole package and a school needs the awareness of the whole child and that includes their families”.

The onset of puberty is said to be a remarkable and exciting period for young people who have the right support from parents or other caring relatives, but for others it can become a problematic and dangerous time [37].

As research has shown that stable family formations and parental involvement in children's school work contribute to positive outcomes, perhaps it is time to go back to basics—the basics of building stable family lives. The fact that young people today are under immense pressure from an overload of information technology requires regular parental monitoring, as some of the influences could have detrimental effect on their lives.

The implication is that disengagement could be prevented if the early warning signs, which are always apparent, are identified and followed up through the development of targeted and sustained interventions. This also includes but is not limited to the employment of experienced and professional staff and adequate training where staff lack experience.

3. Conclusions

This review of literature affirms the findings of a previous study on motivating disaffected and disengaged learners [38]. The study highlights strategies for managing re-engagement as using flexible teaching/learning approaches, creating opportunities for learners to choose courses or subjects based on interest, role modeling, collaboration and consistent liaison with parents/carers and school. These strategies do not only bring about improved attendance and punctuality, but also lessens the disruption to learning caused by external influences. They also contribute to sustaining learner interest in learning and raising achievement. However, a quick caution here will be to look into the current practice of placing the students in one cohort; this practice tends to reinforce challenging behaviour as there is no role model for acceptable behaviour in the classroom. In a survey on schools that were successful in re-engaging disaffected and reluctant students, the Office for Standards in Education Ofsted [28] reported that such schools “recognised that a student's disengagement had the potential to influence others,” and aimed to tackle the “causes” and not “effects”.

Experience has shown that students' ability to re-engage with learning is possible as long as teachers and other staff show genuine understanding and care towards the challenges students face in their lives. There is the suggestion that their inability to concentrate during lessons is as a result of the impact of the challenges they face in their personal lives. Looking at it from the point of view of Maslow's Hierarchy of needs [39], these are learners who may be struggling with biological, physiological, safety, belongingness and love needs. They are not concerned with the higher order needs, until their lower order needs are met. Eva's lack of motivation, reflected in her comment [34] to her teacher is consistent with the idea postulated by Maslow; however, it is necessary to note that, despite the popularity of Maslow's theory, it is open to debate; an argument that deprivation at the lower level of need does not necessarily result in a halt to self-actualisation. But the fact remains that as educators, we need to identify and strive to meet students' needs.

Again, the decision of what constitutes knowledge ought to go beyond the argument of intellectual respectability and popularity but focus more on utility and harnessing individual strengths.

From my experience, one of the first things to do with disaffected students is to try to break the cycle of negativity which they have had to deal with for a long time. The next, as mentioned earlier, is to adopt unconventional teaching methods and flexible learning options. Another would be to provide additional support to meet students' learning needs. While I am not in a position to determine the extent to which schools provide support for individual needs, reports from teachers themselves suggest that rigid adherence to meeting targets as opposed to meeting the needs of students may be counterproductive for student learning. As the Teacher Network has noted:

“It is the publishing of league tables that has had the most corrosive effect on education...” [40].

“The EBacc is a perfect example of how children are suffering due to targets. Many students are being ‘forced’ onto it whether or not it is the best thing for them just so the schools have a chance to hit a certain percentage on EBacc and so secure a certain place in a local league table. Many pupils are unhappy about this but their protestations are being swept aside by staff to the detriment of their education” [40].

Creating policies such as the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc), a performance measure for securing a good General Certificate of Secondary Education grade in core academic subjects, may alienate and disempower a group of students—this kind of requirement may pollute their image of themselves and create room for disengagement.

Although a concerted effort is being made towards a reform of the curriculum, support for other risk factors linked to disengagement must be pursued equally if we are to get students back on track.

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