

Quantity for quality: a case study on the impact of an English work-based learning programme on disaffected pupils' qualification achievements

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Contextualization

This paper is based on a doctoral study that looked at the perceptions of disaffected pupils undertaking a vocational learning programme in an out-of-school environment. While the main research utilised a qualitative methodology, this small study asks whether the impact of the programme on pupils' qualification achievements can inform us of the overall efficacy for these learners. The data are drawn, therefore, from a separate and quantitative investigation. A second aim of this paper is its use of triangulation where the alternative data collection process acts to support/challenge the findings of the larger research project.

Abstract: *Disaffection with learning is a concern for many countries and research into strategies aimed at tackling it often report varied success. This paper investigates the impact of work-related learning on the qualification achievements of 14–16 year olds in a small number of secondary schools in England. The data are collated quantitatively with a numerical measure for the qualifications achieved by pupils accessing a work-based learning programme. The learners on the programme have been identified by their school as disaffected yet illustrate re-engagement in learning when educated off site. For the vast majority, qualifications have been secured and this is used as evidence for the overall success of the programme. It is argued that the learners have positive experiences of learning and develop strong relationships with tutors as they embrace an alternative environment.*

Introduction

Recently in the United Kingdom, disaffection has been identified as on the rise for many young people (Jones, 2013; Newburn and Shiner, 2005; Steer, 2000), along with the high number classified as Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) (Institute of Education, 2009). In particular, the issue of pupils disengaging at Key Stage four (14–16 year olds) of their education has become a focus of concern. Numerous strategies have been implemented to tackle the issue of youth disaffection and this article examines one such intervention programme: out-of-school, work-related learning (WRL) environments. Disaffection is also a concern for other countries such as America (Kelly and Price, 2009), Australia (Granite and Graham, 2012), Lithuania (Petrušauskaitė, 2010) and has been the subject of much debate. The purpose of this brief study is to ascertain any potential impact that a work-based learning programme (WBLP) may have in relation to disaffected pupils' academic achievements. The number of qualifications gained is used as a measurement of the overall effect (and thus a measure for the overall learning) of this programme. While some environments are actual workplaces, most are training providers that merely simulate a workplace. As such, the term 'work-based' is employed generically by the schools to refer to any WRL that is undertaken on the WBLP.

The pupils in the study have been identified as 'disaffected' as their disinterest in learning in school has reached the stage wherein it is impinging on their studies and has therefore led to their disengagement. These pupils are often at risk of exclusion and unlikely to achieve without intervention. They have been allocated to the WBLP as an opportunity to pursue alternative

learning and potentially redress their disengagement. Thus, the term 'disengagement' is used in this article to refer to schools' subjective appraisal of pupils' non-participation - in particular where it is deemed to be hindering their progress. Such pupils may be identified as failing to meet the required attainments. However, low-level engagement – where teachers are happy that there is some participation – is often enough to prevent a pupil from becoming a concern.

This research looks at evaluating this programme and asks whether qualification output at 16 years of age can be improved. The programme is run by the local authority (LA) of a borough in the north of England, referred to here as Newtown. The programme offers re-engagement for disaffected pupils and vocational learning in areas such as hairdressing, motor vehicle maintenance, sports studies, engineering and construction. The pupils attend the WBLP between one and five days per week, with most attending for three days on average. School attendance for the duration of the programme can be sporadic and often declines during the initial three months.

Work-based learning for disaffection

Disaffection at school has been shown to be positively reduced through experiences of the real world or the mimicking of this environment (Hall and Raffo, 2004; Raffo, 2003). Moreover, Watson, Stuart and Ferguson (2000) suggest that 'work-based and work-related learning secures improvement in student behaviour [and] can enhance mainstream National Curriculum subjects as well as forming the basis of a specific learning programme'. They also go on to point out that for some pupils, the environment of the school system can hold negative connotations in comparison to learning in a work-related atmosphere and this can contribute to poor attainment at school. However, as Fuller and Unwin (1998, 153) note, vocational learning has long been stigmatised when distinguishing between 'formal and informal education [as it] implies the superiority of learning which takes place within educational institutions over...that which occurs in the workplace'. Therefore, pupils on programmes such as the WBLP may face learning discrimination and the potential label of 'lower ability'.

However, schools in Newtown identify learners as disaffected rather than 'incapable' and view alternative learning as an opportunity to tailor an individual educational route for each pupil. Moreover, although *learning styles* has been viewed as a contentious concept (Coffield et al., 2004), a common discourse throughout the schools is that many pupils may not be suited to the school environment or the classroom. Learning styles questionnaires have recently been completed by pupils on the WBLP and over 70% were identified as kinaesthetic. However, due to a lack of consistent evidence, many learning styles' diagnoses have been contested (Nixon, Gregson and Spedding, 2007; Veenman, Prins and Verheij, 2003).

Whether learners are engaged as a result of the style of learning that they are undertaking or whether they merely share an interest with the subject matter, it could be argued that interest is indeed generated and sustained on the WBLP. The data used to support this are based on achievement rates and overall qualifications. Although this cannot account for quality, however, it is perhaps evidence to suggest the pupils are committed to their learning. Prior to the formation of the WBLP, many 'disaffected' pupils in Newtown achieved few qualifications before they were 16 years old and a considerable number were excluded.

Typologising the learning that occurs in a typical provider allows the environment to be differentiated from school. Thus, learning is often presented as academic and non-academic or formal and informal. While informal learning has been regarded as inferior, its superiority in meeting the needs of disaffected pupils could be argued. For these particular pupils, a work-related environment has been shown to be conducive to learning and is therefore attributed higher relevance than school.

The occurrence of learning

Success in the uptake and acceptance of work-related learning could be seen to be partly due to the use of the term 'learning' rather than 'training'. If training is linked to practicality and vocational learning (as it often is), then re-branding can help it become de-stigmatised. In this way, *learning* is learning regardless of the manner in which it occurs. Such complexity and potential overlapping of concepts can be seen with Zuboff (1988, 395) who claims that learning

is no longer a separate activity that occurs either before one enters the workplace or in remote classroom settings. Nor is it...something that requires time out from being engaged in productive activity; learning is the heart of productivity activity.

As learning can theoretically occur anywhere – Zuboff (1988, 395) refers to it as 'the new form of labor' – pupils undertaking work-related learning arguably have the opportunity for learning of equal merit to that of the classroom (quality of teaching and other variables aside). However, the purpose of the programme in this study is to re-engage as well as rekindle learning opportunities and this is often achieved through a strong teacher-student relationship and peer interactions

In their study of disaffected youths undertaking WRL, Hall and Raffo (2004, 73) found evidence of 'positive experiences of adult relationships in the workplace [that were] beneficial in motivational terms to young people...in terms of their attitude to school.' The students were seen to develop a more mature attitude towards the school system, their peers, and the adult tutors. Moreover, they developed skills in efficiency when confronted with tasks away from their prior peer groups wherein they 'forge[d] new identities' (Hall and Raffo 2004, 74). In a similar way, Newtown's success with disengaged youths may be argued as the result of their removal from the problematic environment of school: an environment with which these young people fail to connect. The negative effect of this, however, is the lack of engagement in academic subjects.

Context

The small borough of Newtown, although having progressed in recent years, is generally known for its above-average level of deprivation and poor educational outcomes. In 2002, in response to a growing number of disaffected young people, the local authority formed the WBLP. This programme acts as overarching provision of vocational learning and utilises the expertise of around 26 private training providers. Each provider is contracted to the programme's framework and new providers can only be assigned through a tendering process (every three years). For Newtown, the WBLP is reputed to be successful in tackling disaffection and avoiding exclusion for those pupils deemed to be 'at risk'. While the quality of provision can vary from provider to provider, schools appear satisfied overall. The majority of the students have missed a considerable portion of schooling and show signs of resistance to learning in many environments. Consequently, areas such as literacy and numeracy are generally diagnosed (through an initial assessment) as being lower than average; therefore, although these are available as stand-alone qualifications, they are often embedded in the vocational subjects. The literacy and numeracy achievements in the providers are small in comparison to the school, yet achievement *per se* is rated highly for pupils who have missed substantial periods of schooling.

From its inception, the programme dealt with disaffection and exclusions and then later evolved to offer vocational learning. As a result of this, the academic learning of the individuals was initially neglected and had to be addressed. Many of the learners did not attend school at all and missed out on certain subjects. The training providers engaged the learners through the creation of an informal, and non-school, environment. Consequently, the provision developed to address academic learning and to help the pupils achieve a qualification. Learners on the programme had displayed great resistance to the school environment yet were seen to embrace the environment of the training providers.

Methodology

This study used a quantitative data collection process in order to triangulate the findings from a larger, more qualitative, study. The data represent the numbers of qualifications achieved by pupils undertaking WRL in the borough of Newtown. Over the last three years, the number of qualifications achieved on the programme has increased and this has drawn a great deal of attention from schools. As a result, more pupils have been allocated to the programme to allow schools to concentrate on delivering the curriculum at the required time and thus avoid the exclusion of those deemed to be disaffected. The learners on the programme are considered to represent a baseline of zero, i.e. schools are insistent they will not achieve if they remain solely in school. Therefore, every qualification or award that is attained is deemed to be evidence of success for schools.

The area of concern when devising this study was the output for each year and whether it could be argued that the quality of teaching and learning may have improved or declined. The data show the number of qualifications achieved. The figure for each year is shown for comparison while the number of learners achieving is also given as a percentage to account for variation in overall attendance. Moreover, the average number of qualifications per learner has been calculated.

Participants and procedure

A typical training provider ambience is evaluated here through the qualification output of its learners. The data were collected from the WBLP database, local authority records, and the pupils' schools, with some input from *Futures* (a pseudonym for a local independent service that provides information, advice and guidance to young people). Data for qualifications achieved were provided through the WBLP where details such as *type of qualification*, *governing body* and *level of achievement* are recorded. Certificates are collected from the providers via the WBLP and then issued to schools.

All the pupils in this study attended secondary schools in Newtown and were between 14 and 16 years old. Around 93% of the student body are classified as white, with the remaining percentage comprising black, Asian and Chinese, while the gender split shows that 42% are female. The pupils were categorised by their school as 'disaffected' if they displayed any of the following criteria:

- A severe reduction in attendance (below 50%) - excluding authorised absence or long-term illness
- Persistent disruptive behaviour
- Reduced engagement
- Lack of achievement, i.e. falling behind in their schoolwork

Where applicable, reasons for showing any of these criteria were explored by schools. Prior to each pupil's allocation, parents/guardians were consulted and asked to give consent. For the most part pupils were only allocated to the WBLP when teachers deemed them to be actively disengaging.

Results

The tables below detail the qualifications achieved over a three-year period. All qualifications have had some (if not all) input from the training providers and can, therefore, be considered to be measurable to some degree under the umbrella of work-based learning. Table 1 outlines the total number of qualifications achieved through attending both the WBLP and school and Table 2 shows the number achieved solely on the WBLP.

Table 1. Total number of qualifications achieved from attendance on WBLP and school.

Year	Students	Percentage of students with qualification	Mean qualifications	Entry level 3 (pre-GCSE)	Level 1	Level 2
2010	430	44.5	1.4	138	120	9
2011	418	46.5	2.3	202	201	28
2012	427	57.6	3.2	381	203	34

N.B. Level 1 is GCSE: D – G equivalent and Level 2 is GCSE: A* – C equivalent.

Table 2. Total number of qualifications achieved solely on the WBLP.

Year	Students	Entry level 3 (pre-GCSE)	Level 1	Level 2
2010	91	89	2	0
2011	91	89	2	0
2012	167	141	26	0

N.B. Level 1 is GCSE: D – G equivalent and Level 2 is GCSE: A* – C equivalent.

The data suggest that maintaining links with the base school can have positive implications for qualification achievement. However, it is also clear that the WBLP has had an impact on learners who were identified with a baseline of zero, i.e. those not expected to achieve at all. While Table 1 shows that overall qualifications have risen steadily each year, examination of Table 2 reveals that the rise between 2011 and 2012 is due to a larger contribution from the WBLP. From Table 1 we can see that there is a steady increase in the percentage of students achieving a qualification. By 2012, there are more students achieving a qualification overall and also, on average, a greater number of qualifications per learner. This evidence suggests a stronger impact for 2012 when significantly more qualifications are attained overall.

While the area of non-achievement is problematic and a cause for concern, the rise in attainment figures does suggest that the mechanism for reaching disaffected students has improved. However, the figures for non-achievement reveal a notable number of students each year who have left the programme with no qualifications. However, the LA argue that due to the pupils' increased attendance, most have been re-engaged in some way and non-assessed *soft skills* (communication and social interaction, attitude, behaviour and so on) have also developed. Furthermore, data for students with no qualifications in 2012 have an 82% progression into work or some form of further learning (source: *Futures* database).

Discussion

Whilst the overall achievement rate has for the past four years increased progressively, and each learner is reputed to be engaging more, the providers are not in a position to compete academically with schools and those pupils who choose to engage. The pupils in this research participate in WRL yet show an aversion to school. As they are for the most part disengaged, it is argued that they are operating with a baseline of zero, i.e. without intervention they will achieve nothing. Although this may be seen as a somewhat contentious position, it does allow for a measurement of progress (or even deterioration), albeit strictly in relation to qualification achievement. For qualitative progress, WRL can engage pupils in learning in general but attitudes towards school may be adversely affected.

Hall and Raffo (2004, 71), for instance, argue that: 'The benefits of work-related learning for young people...do not readily transfer to school-based settings and...do not necessarily result in improved levels of motivation or attainment at school'. Where their study differs, however, is in the way the programme functions. Whilst their training led to NVQs, all the learners

continued to attend school for four days per week, leaving only one day for WRL. Most of the pupils on the Newtown programme, however, do not attend school, while those attending school merely do so for one or two days; therefore, the WBLP could be seen to be making the largest contribution to their learning.

The importance of this for performance figures reveals itself in the output. Unfortunately, however, it is difficult for pupils on the Newtown WBLP to achieve many *academic* qualifications due to their having missed a vast amount of schooling. For this reason, Functional Skills are taught and the resultant impact could be said to improve qualification output. Functional Skills refers to the necessary English and maths skills needed to become efficient in a specific vocational area. Many of the pupils who do not attend school will sit literacy and numeracy exams in the provider and this also contributes to qualification achievement at the end of the year.

Conclusion

Measuring the impact of a programme such as this in another way could be a vast undertaking that requires months of qualitative analysis of teaching and learning methods and tracking of students' progression routes for a number of years after they have left. What is attempted here is an outline of the programme to illustrate the many 'measurements' that can be used to gauge its success. Using one of these (qualification output), an assessment is made of the programme's contribution to learning - in particular its potential to re-engage through vocational learning. We can, however, draw conclusions from the data and use these as a basis for further study. The attainment of the pupils recorded here offers merely one aspect of the overall effect of the programme and further research could investigate the quality of the teaching and learning through an exploration of the students' perceptions. Moreover, it is argued that the WBLP also contributes to learning in school for those who attend both. Therefore, interviews with students could help to capture data on attitudes to learning to support this claim. In sum, when success is measured on qualification output, the WBLP is seen to have an impact. The students in this study were considered to be disaffected, many were at risk of exclusion, and schools argue that they would not have achieved without intervention.

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