

Setting them up to fail? Post-16 progression barriers of previously disengaged students

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Abstract

This paper looks at post-16 progression opportunities for a group of previously disaffected 14–16-year-old students who undertook vocational learning in their final two years at school in the north-west of England. The paper argues that advanced forms of vocational learning at key stage 4 are leading to over-skilling and educational limbo for many young people. Questionnaire data was obtained from 109 participants in total. These included 16-21-year-olds looking to enter further education or employment with training (n=84), 14 vocational learning tutors, and 11 further education teachers. Although the vocational route can lead to a nationally recognised qualification, literacy and numeracy achievements are often below the expected standard, thus creating a mismatch in identified abilities. Due to the current government-enforced pressure to succeed in English and maths, a perceived ‘deficiency’ in any of these areas presents a significant barrier to progression. The students in this study are seen to be vocationally over-skilled yet underachieving in academic areas. As such, progression routes are severely limited, resulting in a high number of individuals dropping out of learning altogether.

Introduction

Disengagement from secondary schools in England is becoming a growing concern for educational research (Allan, 2014a; Jones, 2013; Newburn and Shiner, 2005), while the 16-19 arena is also said to illustrate an ‘alarming rise in the levels of young people...who are detached from both the labour market and the education and training system’ (Maguire, 2015: 121). Arguably, school disengagement can directly impinge on both educational and social disaffection and thus eventually lead to a rise in those not in education, employment or training (NEET) (Simmons and Thompson, 2011; Stevens *et al.*, 2014).

This paper explores the post-16 educational opportunities and routes of previously disengaged young people in a small borough in the north of England, known as Newtown (pseudonym). The young people in this study have all previously undertaken a vocational learning programme to address their disaffection with learning in school. However, their current situation suggests that for many this is not always aligned to their previously intended destination or, indeed, the educational route that they were pursuing at the time. The programme is run by the local authority of Newtown and is known as its work-based learning programme (WBLP). This paper seeks to examine the young people’s perceptions of vocational learning and, in particular, the WBLP’s capacity to facilitate post-16 opportunities. Opportunities beyond the programme are deemed to be widely varied yet due to its logistical functioning there is often an unfortunate by-product of over-skilling, leading to many

young people becoming frustrated, disaffected, and, subsequently, further disengaged and NEET.

It is argued, then, that preventing the re-emergence of disengagement at post-16 is a critical aspect of vocational learning programmes for 14-16-year-olds. In order to reduce NEET levels, Maguire (2015: 130) recommends policy address and ‘re-engagement strategies for the hardest to reach groups.’ To go further, pre-16 education can thus be perceived as an early contributor to NEET prevention, along with many other factors, such as family, peers and local employment potential (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2016).

The participants in the study were asked to evaluate the WBLP and to identify what contribution they believe their attendance on this programme has made to their current educational and/or employment status.

Context

According to Maguire (2015: 121), the UK has ‘nearly a million 16–24-year-olds who are recorded as being...NEET.’ Although ‘NEET’ refers to a post-16 typology, school participation provides a valuable contribution ‘to the making of self and society’ (McGraw, 2011: 106). As such, pre-16 experiences play an important role in progression beyond compulsory education and, in many cases, can carry through to later life. In England, students at key stage 4 (14-16-year-olds) who are not engaging in their education are often identified as, or at risk of becoming, disaffected (McKendrick, Scott and Sinclair, 2007), and in recent years the number of disaffected

students has risen (Jones, 2013). Moreover, without support or intervention such disaffection can worsen after the age of 16. Consequently, young people who would previously have been categorised as NEET can find themselves shoehorned into ill-suited training programmes in order to meet the demands of the raising of the participation age (RPA) for compulsory education.

However, while such engagement may seem a step up from NEET, there are often many unfortunate consequences where young people become further marginalised from the education system.

While the RPA has perhaps delayed NEET status, many young people between 16 and 18 still struggle to secure a suitable educational placement, particularly where levels of literacy and numeracy do not meet the required standards. Consequently, some head teachers are already claiming that the mandatory resitting of English and maths GCSEs is impacting on motivation (Espinoza, 25.08.16).

For many of these young people, the NEET label looms heavily on the horizon and earlier disaffection can re-emerge as they find themselves marginalised in society, particularly those already suffering the effects of societal disadvantage (Pring *et al.*, 2009). As Maguire (2015: 14) states, ‘the term NEET is now commonly used to capture disengagement and social exclusion, as well as levels of unemployment, among young people.’ Although the NEET figures for 16-24-year-olds have reduced in recent years (Department for Education, 2015), statistics suggest that these levels are still way too high as they are ‘above the OECD average’ (Mirza-Davies, 2015: 3).

Moreover, the number of disengaged young people in schools in England has risen of late and the impact of this may well be seen in NEET figures of the future.

Disaffection and disengagement

Disaffection and disengagement are often used interchangeably in the literature yet despite some overlap in the way they are conceptualised, there are arguably clear distinctions. While disaffection is a state of mind – representing a lack of connection with the environment and a level of disinterest – disengagement is an act, often undertaken with distinct agency (Allan, 2014a). According to Willms (2003: 8), young people disengaged with education are, ‘students who do not feel they belong at school and have withdrawn from school activities in a significant way.’ Thus, the two are often related in that disengagement is the resultant factor of disaffection, although not all individuals with disaffection will become disengaged (Feng and Jament, 2009).

Students disaffected with learning often experience social disaffection too, and this can result in confusion over identity and role. With such strong normative models in place in society and school, young people may become marginalised and subsequently view themselves as the problem. Thus, the pattern may be repeated as students who do not feel they belong at school progress to feelings of not belonging in college, in employment, and in society. The sense of not belonging, then, can lead to NEET, wherein individuals may break away from the norms, particularly where such norms are deemed to be irrelevant, disempowering, and even threatening. For those students who have withdrawn from school, alternative learning providers often pose a neutral

environment in which to reflect on the education system and their role within it; thus facilitating a space for them to engage in greater metacognition (Allan, 2015).

Historically, many young people who are disengaged from school have been encouraged to participate in vocational learning as an alternative educational route (Thomson and Russell, 2009; White and Laczik, 2016). This became particularly prominent during the period of the New Labour government ruling between 1997 and 2010 through strategies such as the Increased Flexibility Programme (IFP). Introduced in 2002, the IFP enabled 14-16-year-olds to attend a college or vocational learning environment in conjunction with their schooling. Literacy and numeracy were addressed on such programmes but attainment varied widely. Today, however, there is increasing pressure on institutions to support these skills through maths and English achievements (particularly GCSEs but often functional skills too), and this sometimes conflicts with the vocational learning where many tutors are ill-prepared.

Vocational learning for re-engagement

Between 2004 and 2012, work-related learning was a mandatory component of schooling in England for 14-16-year-olds (DfES, 2006) and this included CV writing and job searching, although a major aspect of this was the practical elements, such as skills, that could be attained whilst undertaking relevant activities. These are often incorporated into vocational, or work-based, learning programmes; however, one of the criticisms levelled at vocational learning in recent years is that 'it only needs to account for low levels of outcomes' (Billett, 2003: 7), despite the fact that outputs are often based on qualifications rather than on the progression of social and cultural

skills, or on ‘students’ vocational identity development’ (Virtanen *et al.*, 2014: 44). Moreover, the GCSE route can be problematic for many and, as Benton (2015: 260) points out, ‘a different type of qualification may better stimulate certain groups of learners.’

With a default position of GCSE as the gold standard at this age, and the government drive to ensure that young people (up until the age of 19) continue to study these subjects until they achieve a grade C or above in both English and maths, other qualifications are often discredited; indeed, the academic/vocational divide continues to thrive, with vocational learning regularly perceived as inferior (Chankseliani *et al.*, 2016). However, this can be problematic as young people perform much better when they value education (Fuller and Macfadyen, 2012) and an alternative environment can help to re-stimulate interest in learning by encouraging reflection and metacognition (Allan, 2015). In support of this, Raffo (2003: 69) suggests that alternative ways of learning, such as a vocational-related curriculum, can be effective for ‘re-motivating and re-engaging those young people classified as being ‘at risk’ or disaffected.’ As such, disengaged students are often signposted toward vocational routes. However, where academic performance is deemed to be below the expected standard, students can face barriers to progression as they seek to move beyond vocational learning, such as into employment or further education.

In their study, Hodgson and Spours (2014: 471) found that ‘post-16 participation was being fuelled not only by improved attainment at Key Stage 4 and higher aspirations across most of the cohort, but also by the inability of many middle and low attainers

to access the labour market or apprenticeships.’ Vocational achievement alone, then, provides an insufficient educational arsenal for progression. Consequently, where literacy and numeracy ability is held in high esteem, it can become a crucial mechanism for establishing, or avoiding, NEET status. Although the Wolf review of 2011 (Wolf, 2011) resulted in an overhaul, and subsequent reduction, of the number of vocational qualifications and, in particular, their contribution to the GCSE system, there is arguably still a gap where students who are not achieving academically can face educational ‘limbo’, such as poor opportunities for progression. In contrast, however, low-level vocational learning can perpetuate a social class divide, resulting in ‘an impoverished form of employability’ (Simmons, 2009: 137).

The students in this study have undertaken vocational learning as part of their schooling and have then attempted to continue their study through further education. However, the expectations of many courses have resulted in these individuals being perceived as vocationally over-skilled yet academically lacking.

Methodology

This paper draws on questionnaire data collected through a Bristol Online Survey (BOS), wherein 109 participants responded. These included 16-21-year-olds who had undertaken the WBLP in the last five years (n=84), vocational learning tutors from the private training providers (n=14), and further education teachers (n=11). The aim of the project was to collect data on the young people’s experiences of the WBLP and to identify how they felt it had impacted on their current situation. The young people

who completed the questionnaire could be organised into one of the following four categories:

i) *currently working* ii) *attending college* iii) *working and studying* iv) *NEET*.

The following research questions were used to steer the initial research focus:

- What education, training or employment routes do these young people pursue after undertaking the WBLP?
- How does the WBLP prepare young people for post-16 progression routes?

The questionnaire comprised both open-ended and closed responses to elicit varied data. Thus, quantitative data were used to provide an overarching student perspective and qualitative data were collected to present the richness of personal experience. This paper focuses primarily on the qualitative aspect of the research.

A thematic analysis of the data was conducted (see Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012) on the open-ended questions and several themes were highlighted as areas of importance, as identified by the participants. While the mainstay of the research asks young people whether or not they feel that the WBLP has established an appropriate route for them, the teacher and tutor responses are used to add an extra dimension to the data.

The project was institutionally funded and ethical clearance was sought through the institution's Faculty Ethics Committee.

Demographics

Newtown is an area that is predominantly white (95+%). It has a ratio of females to males of 1.1:1 respectively. A self-reported status indicates that the participant group comprised: 81 White, 1 Asian, and 1 Black, while a gender demographic illustrates:

- 48 females
- 36 males

About the WBLP

The WBLP in Newtown caters for around 450 disengaged 14-16-year-olds and proffers an alternative educational route to compulsory schooling. Students on this programme attend from one to five days per week in an off-site environment. While many retain some connection with their school, however, others illustrate signs of negative reinforcement (Allan, 2014a; Hall and Raffo, 2004), whereupon they use the programme as a mechanism for further dissociating themselves from school.

The programme draws on the vocational specialisms of 26 private training providers, offering courses in areas such as construction, motor vehicle mechanics, hair and beauty training, and sports. It is deemed by schools in the area to be successful for ‘turning around’ attitudes to learning, and evidence of improvements in attendance and attainment for many disengaged young people has previously been recorded (Allan, 2014b). The provision is mostly informal – although qualifications are encouraged and, indeed, often secured – and aims to help students re-engage in

learning-oriented tasks. Due to the perceived flexibility, the students report that the initial lack of pressure to undertake a qualification enables them to refocus on learning and to re-evaluate their needs. The programme is also said to benefit from established links with students' families and members of the community.

Students on the programme mostly worked at entry level, although some studied at higher levels. Table 1 illustrates some qualifications and their equivalents within the English education system.

Table 1. Qualification equivalents (English system)

Vocational level	Academic equivalence
Level 3	A-Level
Level 2	GCSE, grades A-C
Level 1	GCSE, grades D-G
Entry level 3	Pre-GCSE
Entry level 2	Pre-GCSE
Entry level 1	Pre-GCSE

(Source: Gov.uk, 2015)

Findings

The themes that emerged from the data were formed into the following meta-themes:

- Barriers to progression – literacy and numeracy
- Over-skilling of vocational ability
- Disempowerment
- WBLP as a discard.

Barriers to progression – literacy and numeracy

Out of 84 participants, 79 say that the college course of their choosing, at the appropriate level, was unavailable to them due to their low attainments in literacy and numeracy. Colleges in and around Newtown often required the students to undertake courses at the level that they had already achieved and, in some instances, a level below this:

They wouldn't let me do the level two bricklaying course even though I've got me level one and I've been doing level two stuff for ages (Eddie).

Literacy and numeracy skills were deemed to be highly valuable and without suitable qualifications in these areas students were redirected to another course:

It doesn't matter how good the students are practically, they need to fulfil the criteria for the whole course. We embed maths and English so if they are not up to it they will fail (College tutor).

We cannot allocate a placement on a level 1 course to a student who is working at entry level in English and maths. It would be unethical. I think this would be setting them up to fail (College tutor).

However, many of the students feel that their vocational skills are of a high standard and that denying them such progression is counterproductive:

I was told that I would only be able to enrol on entry three motor vehicle mechanics because my level one wasn't recognised and because my maths wasn't up to scratch. It's not fair! All you do on entry level is basic stuff. I'm way past that (Sally).

In addition to the denial of suitability, based solely on academic achievements, staff at the college also made judgements on the professionalism of some of the provision:

We have had quite a number of students from the programme who have literacy and numeracy certificates but we know from experience that they are still lacking in many areas. I think there are different level ones, depending on who assesses them (College tutor).

Over-skilling of vocational ability

Some students were seen to be over-skilled in their vocational learning, in the sense that they struggled to progress to further education or an apprenticeship. A mismatch

was identified between vocational skills and academic ability, although tutors in the providers claimed that continuing the vocational learning was as important as addressing the academic shortfall:

There's no point saying 'just make the tea or brush the floor' when they've been here for 18 months. These girls are brilliant. We have clients coming in and they'll [clients] ask for a specific girl [student]. That's how good they are (Tutor: hair and beauty placement).

The WBLP tutors stressed that progress was an essential part of the students' re-engagement programme and suggested that many of their young people were extremely capable in practical ways:

We have an excellent rapport with all of our students and we want the best for them. If they are capable then we encourage them (Tutor: motor vehicle placement).

Tutors also fear that students will drop out if they are not consistently challenging them:

If we just kept them [students] on the basic stuff we would lose them. We teach up to level 2 and lots of these kids are very capable of doing this level. I don't believe in holding them back (Tutor: construction placement).

While this is arguably good teaching and enables the students to progress appropriately, there is an unfortunate corollary of this in that many of the students have been set up to fail. Further training, and, indeed, much further education, at the appropriate level becomes unavailable until the students' maths and English ability 'catches up.'

Disempowerment

As a result of over-skilling, and the mismatch between vocational and academic ability, students report feelings of disempowerment and frustration:

Because I haven't got maths GCSE, I was told I couldn't enrol at the college unless I went back and did entry 3 mechanics. I already have level 1 in mechanics (John).

In some situations, students illustrate that the barrier was too great and that an alternative career choice was called for:

I've been working with my dad since I left because [institution name] College said I would have to do the certificate again (Tyler).

Despite this, some students did persist with the learning route that the college suggested but found that their progression was somewhat limited:

I tried the entry 3 because I was told that I needed to do English and maths but we have only done a bit anyway. The course was too easy but they wouldn't let me change so I just dropped out (Emily).

WBLP as a discard

From the full 84 student responses, 46 are now undertaking (or did undertake) a radically different course altogether, after dropping out of the course they claim they were coerced on to. Consequently, many of these students pursued alternative career paths.

I gave it up and I'm on a foundation course now. I'm hoping to go into nursing'
(Sarah, previous hairdressing student).

Whilst the WBLP is rated highly by previous students (Allan, 2014b), and many of these also claim it was a worthwhile experience – e.g., *'If it wasn't for the WBLP I don't know what would have happened to me'* (Daniel) – there is a sense that the programme's capacity to facilitate progression beyond 16 is limited, due to political expectations for academic achievements.

Discussion

Out of all 84 participants, only 9 stated that they were undertaking an appropriate college course – i.e., one from which the WBLP acted as a precursor – and that they were happy with their progress. Thus, a greatly significant number of the participants have pursued an educational route that is highly unsuitable, and one in which they

have been required to overcome many barriers. An arguably tragic consequence of this is that many of these students will only be able to return to learning at their previous level of achievement in literacy and numeracy. In this way, the students show that they no longer value education and this impacts negatively on their learning (Fuller and Macfadyen, 2012). Moreover, the perceived ‘dead end’ that is reached as the students attempt to move into further education is seen to be significantly disheartening, and can result in further dissociation from school (Hall and Raffo, 2004). Thus, 29 participants of the WBLP – many of whom ‘graduated’ with level one in their specialist area (and with many industry skills that are unacknowledged by the education system) – are now officially unemployed and registered as NEET. At the time of writing, various employment agencies such as Connexions were attempting to negotiate a suitable pathway to return to learning. However, anecdotal evidence provided verbally by a key worker suggests that this could be problematic:

‘It’s all too little, too late. We try but they’re just not interested. And I don’t blame them after what they’ve had to put up with’ (Connexions key worker).

For progression, the local colleges often require the students to undertake courses at the level that they are already demonstrating and, in many instances, even lower, because the criteria for literacy and numeracy must be fulfilled. Many of these are through functional skills courses, despite the fact that perceiving these as ‘stepping stone’ qualifications is highly misleading (Allan, 2017). In such instances, institutions are reluctant to allow the students to participate in vocational learning above level one. Moreover, even though many are resitting maths and English GCSEs, there are

still barriers for those whose vocational skills far exceed their (labelled) academic ability. With over half of the participants moving into alternative courses – in some cases towards a new career path altogether (Sarah, for instance) – the WBLP, although regarded as highly effective in re-engaging disaffected young people, is merely a temporary measure of engagement as it lacks the necessary support from post-16 institutions.

A key debate that emerges from this research, then, centres on disempowerment, giving rise to the question, Who is setting them up to fail? From a college perspective, responsibility lies with the WBLP for not developing English and maths skills but these subject areas are reputed to be key contributors of the students' disengagement. The resultant factor, therefore, is the tragic over-skilling of vocational ability. However, students need to be stretched and challenged (Coe *et al.*, 2014) and holding them back because of lack of achievement in English and maths can, and does, encourage such young people to disengage, particularly those students who were previously marginalised by the education system and thus used the WBLP to facilitate their return to learning. As the WBLP tutor and provider manager argues, 'Should we restrict learning just because the standards tell us we are racing ahead?'

Two of Maguire's (2015: 130) three recommendations to reduce NEETs are relevant for this paper:

1. policies which tackle NEET prevention
2. re-engagement strategies for the hardest to reach groups

Arguably, the first is important because NEET can often be a culmination of years of disaffection and disillusionment with education and/or society and thus pre-16 experiences play a role. The second point identifies strategies for re-engagement and from this research I would concur that this is still very much in need of development. First, such strategies aimed at the 14-16 age range are arguably key indicators of later disaffection; thus, NEET is perhaps as much an issue for 14-16 recommendations as it is for 16-19 policy. Therefore, greater coherence may need to be established between 14-16 and 16-19 to allow for a smoother transition for those young people who are deemed to be at risk from an early age.

While this can be seen through much 14-19 discourse, pre-16 is still an arguably distinct area in itself, particularly as the RPA has a wide remit of training, education, or employment with training, and so on. As such, the common denominator is perhaps the continued study of English and maths, and the consequences of this latest policy thinking – students continuing to study these subjects until they either achieve a C or above or they reach their 19th birthday – may be borne out in a perception of further pressure and the perpetuation of disaffection. To counter this, greater links between FE and private provision may help to bridge the progression barrier, and stronger embedding of literacy and numeracy within vocational learning can ease post-16 progression, as well as challenging the lack of parity between vocational and academic learning.

This research suggests, then, that although some private training providers may not have the academic capacity to support young people through GCSEs, they often excel in their ability to re-engage disaffected young people in some form of learning, as well as in helping them to feel more included in a learning environment. Moreover, the students in this study are moving beyond expectations in relation to their vocational learning, and such a gulf between these skills and academic achievements can present many barriers.

Conclusion

For schools, disengagement is a major concern and the WBLP has previously been deemed an invaluable strategy for re-engaging young people in some form of learning, although there is often a negative reinforcement of perception of schooling itself (Allan, 2014a; Hall and Raffo, 2004). The vocational learning, undertaken on the WBLP, clearly goes beyond what is expected and young people are reputed to be picking up professional skills at a high level. Moreover, for today's current 'stretch and challenge' discourse, this is arguably an important, and potentially effective, form of teaching. As seen, however, this generates barriers in that progression for these young people becomes highly problematic as they are engulfed in a system that heavily values academic learning over its vocational counterpart. Alternative education providers can play a critical role in addressing those 'hard to reach' young people and it is thus important to sustain interest wherever possible. However, for a smoother transition the English education system is in need of address in many ways.

Schooling is often unnecessarily focused on a university route and while this is useful for some, it can prove a wholly disengaging experience for others. Progression for a wide number of people is potentially limited and such programmes as the WBLP that help to re-engage young people and ‘turn lives around’ should be in a stronger position in which to feed into further education. In some ways, this research contributes to the debate on the lack of parity between vocational and academic learning by identifying strengths and weaknesses in each. From a widening participation perspective, however, the current emphasis on the importance of English and maths to the detriment of other subject areas is significantly failing many young people.

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