

# [INSIGHTS]

## EDUCATION ISN'T WORKING FOR US – LISTENING TO DISENGAGED YOUNG PEOPLE

**A minority of young people are negative about education and become disengaged.<sup>1</sup> This study investigated their experience. Most saw the primary problem as the system. For them, school was an environment that was hard to endure, where some teachers were indifferent to them, where learning was not possible and where, whatever their attitude, they could see little chance of success. They knew what helped them to learn and what did not, but had little influence to change how they were taught.**

<sup>1</sup> Disengaged young people are those who are still mostly attending school, but who nevertheless have stopped trying or who actively resist taking part in a positive way.

### KEY POINTS

- 1 Disengaged students do not feel they are incompetent or unable to learn, but that their schooling is not fit for purpose.
- 2 Although they are clear about what conditions help them learn, they do not experience these often.
- 3 Key factors for thriving in school, rather than just surviving, are a sense of competence and positive relations with adults.
- 4 Schools often try to meet all needs by asking pupils to fit into the mainstream, and not the other way around.

### MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

- 1 Schooling needs to change to fit the needs of this group, rather than trying to get them to fit the current system.
- 2 In order to learn, this group needs: understandable instructions; active teaching methods; work with other students; and clear directions for improvement.
- 3 Positive relationships with adults can make a big difference. If teachers can't provide this, often mentors or learning assistants can.
- 4 Teachers need to make a disengaged pupil feel valued, instead of a problem that needs to be solved.

## THE RESEARCH

The research aimed to assess the state of play in education for 14–19-year-olds in relation to four major policy aims: that students should enjoy learning; that they should achieve; that they should want to progress further in education or training; and that they should become confident and responsible citizens. Of particular concern were young people with a negative attitude to school or college, or who have to some degree stopped participating.

Evidence comes from 45 schools and colleges of different types. Each provided policy documents and interviews with governors, staff, parents, partner organisations and students. Additionally, all Year 11 (age 15–16) and approximately half of Year 12 (age 16–17) learners were surveyed by questionnaire, resulting in 2,700 responses from Year 11 and 2,200 from Year 12.

Those interviewed included 65 students who their school or college saw as having a negative attitude. Most were aged 15–16, with a smaller number a year younger or older. They had not withdrawn completely from education or training, but neither were they fully taking part. Some were often absent or excluded. Others spent some of their week learning at an alternative organisation to their school, such as a further education college or local employer.

### HOW STUDENTS EXPERIENCE EDUCATION

A small number of students believed that their failure at school was a result of their own actions. A number acknowledged that they were lazy or not bothered, 'moody' or could not control their anger, or were just not willing to engage with education.

By contrast, the great majority did not see themselves as solely responsible, but believed failure resulted from the unreasonable conditions at school. In particular they found

it hard to cope with long stretches of time without physical activity, when they were required to do a task they did not understand by first listening to the teacher or reading instructions, and then writing. Three-quarters of the group said that they were bored and gave detailed explanations of what boredom meant to them and its effect on their learning.

The experience of school was often described in physical terms. There is a contrast between a high level of noise, with teachers talking or shouting a great deal – a kind of meaningless noise coming at students – and a low level of physical activity, sitting still in class.

Most of these students do not feel incompetent or unable to learn so much as facing demands they can't meet, to the extent that exit appears the best response. Traditional forms of teaching combined with a fast pace suits some students, but excludes many others. The young people's view is that their failure to achieve is not a result of their incompetence but of a curriculum and teaching that is inappropriate for them. They gave instances of how they could learn and were successful in some classes, where they were taught in a different way. In their view, in active classes they were not just happier or less bored; they were learning. A more active style of learning allowed them to learn in ways they could not in other subjects.

Many were able to distinguish between times when they were and were not learning, and related these to the teaching. The conditions which helped them to learn were consistently explained to be:

- clarity of instruction: *"getting it explained properly"*
- active methods: *"activities, not writing"*
- social learning: *"cos if you are working with other people, if you get stuck ... then they can help you out and you are not asking the teacher all the time"* and
- clear direction on improvement: *"they just told us how to improve it and I have"*.

This group of young people did not believe they experienced these conditions frequently at school.

A few appreciated that teachers had done everything they could to help them learn. Some acknowledged their own responsibility, because they were absent from school, not controlling their emotions, not making enough effort, and preferred socialising with friends to hard work. However, they also saw these behaviours as provoked by the strain of school. Sitting bored and out of their depth, in classes they did not follow and with tasks they could not achieve, did not so much make them feel incompetent as forced into a stressful environment from which they took avoiding action.

Negative relationships with teachers were frequent among the group. Many believed that some teachers did not like, respect or care about them. There was awareness of teachers' relief if they were removed from a class or from school.

On occasion a relationship was reported as not just indifferent, but intentionally hostile and destructive. Such instances of active hostility are very much a minority experience. Most of the evidence indicates that some staff are indifferent to this group of students and focus instead on others who have higher attainment or behave better.

The majority had positive relations with some staff. The characteristics the students valued were: a genuine interest in their welfare; trust; making an effort to help them; and giving praise.

Overall, despite the fact that most students had been able to form constructive relations with a minority of teachers, they also thought that some teachers believed they were not worth any effort or that they should be excluded.

Overall, these young people did not avoid taking some responsibility for behaviour that they could see was unhelpful to themselves and others. Nor were they willing to take sole responsibility for their difficulties. They offered poignant descriptions, contrasting many pointless with a few productive lessons, and generally believed in the possibility of success in the future if not the present. Despite

the sometimes negative impact of poor relationships, many retained a sense of their essential worth and competence but were no longer interested in bringing about change so they were better served by their school.

This group cannot escape the consequences of how they do in education. Young people are therefore extremely vulnerable, with little leverage to change things and facing lifelong negative consequences from their failure to succeed in education. Their youth and inexperience mean that, faced with serious difficulties, members of this group are likely to use destructive strategies that make the situation worse. The cards are stacked against these young people.

## MAJOR IMPLICATIONS

There is a serious problem in education. The scale is indicated by the survey, where responses show only half of students felt school had encouraged them to learn more and only a third felt that they had enough say in their own learning. Ten per cent of young people in school and seven per cent in further education felt that education was a waste of time. This represents a large percentage of our future citizens and workforce feeling excluded or let down by the education system.

The young people in this group cope in two primary ways. First, they persist in seeing the system as responsible for their difficulties, at least in part, and in this way keep a sense of self-belief. Second, they persist in believing they will be successful in the future, however unlikely this seems to others. These strategies may protect their self-esteem, but in reality are unlikely to make their future better.

Efforts to improve the experience of the young people were mostly to help them adjust to or cope with the current curriculum and teaching. Some staff try hard to include all students and are often appreciated by learners. However, this should not prevent us from recognising that the overall intention is to retain a curriculum and teaching that suits some learners, more often those from advantaged backgrounds, and not others.



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There was evidence that attempts to change meet resistance. Some of the more academically successful young people who were interviewed objected to attention being paid or rewards given to those they saw as disruptive. Some parents who were interviewed had similar attitudes and resented attention and resources being wasted, as they saw it, on those who did not behave or achieve.

For how long do we go on believing that it is in the nation's interests to depend on the

buoyancy of about 10 per cent of young people to survive a system that does not suit them and puts them at risk? We need to see the problem as the system, which lets a sizable minority of students down, not as the students themselves.

For how long do we try to help disengaged students fit into a system that excludes them, rather than adapt the system? We need to shift the curriculum and teaching radically to include those who do not learn well in the current system. What is needed is more physical activity; more learning by doing; and, above all, a positive focus on all learners in every class, whatever their potential academic attainment. ●

## FURTHER INFORMATION

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