
PUPILS WITH DECLINING ATTAINMENT BETWEEN KEY STAGES 3 AND 4: PROFILES, EXPERIENCES AND IMPACT OF UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT

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Background

DCSF commissioned NatCen to conduct a project to explore why some young people disengaged from education and underachieved at KS4, assess the longer-term impact of such disengagement and underachievement and consider ways in which it may be prevented or countered. It involved an analysis of matched administrative records to identify young people who underachieved at Key Stage 4 (KS4) relative to their performance at Key Stage 3 (KS3); qualitative research with young people (interviewed between June-August 2008 when they were aged 18-19) and their parents / significant others; and interviews with school staff.

Key findings

- Around five per cent of the cohort underachieved at KS4. The characteristics most associated with such underachievement were being male, being White British, entitled to Free School Meals, having Special Educational Needs, and living in a deprived area.
- Profiles of young people's disengagement and underachievement vary across two dimensions - the route by which underachievement occurs (which can be seen as a spectrum from event- or crisis-driven to a gradually occurring process) and the extent to which disengagement occurs.
- Causes of educational disengagement are wide-ranging, often multiple and inter-related and encompass curriculum and learning style, workload and coursework, relationships with teachers, school and class environments, peer relationships, aspirations and future plans, family context and life events.
- Schools collected and used information on attendance, attainment and behaviour to identify underachievement and disengagement and a range of support - universal and targeted - was offered to such students in three areas - curriculum, personal support and careers and options advice.
- Take-up and effectiveness of support varied and a range of factors was involved: the stage at which support was offered, perceived relevance of what was offered, approachability of school staff and young people's relationships with them, timing and location of support, resources, peer relationships.
- Teachers emphasised the need for more personalised and tailored packages of support and argued for using a more appropriate measure of achievement than the traditional 5 GCSEs at Grades A*-C.
- Compared to the total cohort, underachievers had distinctive post-16 destinations: they were less likely to be in school, slightly more likely to be in FE or work-based learning, and more likely to be NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) or in Jobs Without Training (JWT). Those whose attainment dropped between KS3 and KS4 were more likely to become NEET/JWT than those they had outperformed at KS3.

Introduction

The policy objective of increasing the participation of young people aged 16-18 in education and training means that it is important to understand causes of underachievement and disengagement from education before age 16 and how these may be countered to improve post-16 participation.

DCSF commissioned NatCen to:

- analyse matched administrative records to identify young people who underachieve at KS4 relative to their KS3 attainment, and to profile their post-compulsory education destinations;
- explore why young people underachieved and / or disengaged from education at KS4;
- identify circumstances, processes and pathways leading to underachievement and disengagement;
- explore the impact on post-16 destinations and pathways.

Methodology

The methodology comprised four strands:

(i) Analysis of matched administrative records to identify underachievement, identified as a significant drop in attainment between KS3 and KS4 (i.e. those who scored more than one standard deviation below the average score for a given result at the previous key stage). Three underachieving groups (accounting for five percent of the cohort aged 19 in 2009) were defined on the basis that their KS4 result was substantially below the average of their KS3 score: Group A (from high to moderate achievement); Group B (from moderate to reduced achievement) and Group C (High or moderate to no A*-C achievement at KS4).

(ii) Qualitative in-depth interviews with 39 underachieving young people aged 18 or 19 in four areas were undertaken between June - August 2008.

(iii) Qualitative in-depth interviews with 12 staff from three schools in the three of the same areas used for the interviews with young people.

(iv) Qualitative in-depth interviews with parents or significant others - 13 parents and one other family member were interviewed.

Characteristics of underachievement and disengagement during KS4

Logistic regression was used to explore relationships between variables from the Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC). The findings demonstrated that the odds of underachievement were higher for boys than girls, highest for the White British and lowest for the Asian ethnic group, higher for pupils with Special Educational Needs, those entitled to Free School Meals, and those from more deprived areas.

Underachievement and disengagement are distinct - a young person can underachieve while remaining engaged and vice versa. Disengagement refers to a young person's attitude and behaviour toward, and in, school. This includes the extent of their interest as reflected in motivation to attend, study and complete assignments and also the extent to which they see value and purpose in school and see the importance of school attainment for later outcomes.

Young people had varying levels of satisfaction with their own attainment level. For example, some had difficulty with the increased demands of the KS4 curriculum and were satisfied with their attainment, others were satisfied considering other things that were happening to them during KS4, some were clearly dissatisfied and often expressed regret at their own lack of effort in school.

Young people, teachers and parents described two routes by which disengagement and underachievement occur - crisis- or event-driven and gradual. At the event-based end of the spectrum, a particular issue or life event could suddenly and dramatically impact on a young person's engagement with school (e.g. pregnancy, family breakdown, health problems). In the middle of the spectrum were issues or events that were more ongoing but could culminate in disengagement (e.g. worsening bullying, influence of a disengaged peer group). At the gradual end of the spectrum it was harder for young people to pinpoint a starting point or particular factor and their disengagement could occur quietly and easily go unnoticed or they could become disruptive or increasingly absent or truant over time.

The extent of disengagement also varied between those whose attainment declined but they remained engaged (though motivation could vary between subjects) to those who completely disengaged and saw little or no value in school and often had low attendance.

Causes of disengagement and underachievement

A range of factors from within the education system contribute to disengagement. These include curriculum and learning style (e.g. some teachers stressed that a focus on achieving five GCSEs at grades A*-C was not appropriate for all young people and sometimes options that interested them were not available and a preference for "hands-on" learning was not met), workload and coursework (increased emphasis on independent learning and coursework in KS4 could trigger or increase disengagement), breakdown of relationships with teachers, poor school or class environments (e.g. large classes with disruptive pupils).

There were also explanatory "cross-over" factors which could be internal or external to school such as peer pressure and peer group change and breakdown, experience of bullying, and lacking aspirations and plans for the future within which academic achievement seemed relevant.

Factors external to the school system included family context (e.g. parental and sibling experiences of school, level of support and knowledge of the education system), and life events (pregnancy, health, family breakdown, bereavement).

A range of protective factors were identified and were often the converse of the causes of disengagement - e.g. a curriculum seen as relevant, positive aspirations and future plans, positive teacher and peer relationships, and family support.

Identifying and tackling disengagement and underachievement

A range of signs of disengagement and underachievement can be grouped into issues relating to attainment, attendance and behaviour:

Attainment - some schools observed lessons and school work for changes in standard or completion, while others set and reviewed targets regularly. Other schools used more sophisticated electronic systems to monitor trends in attainment.

Attendance - Schools monitored records for any patterns of low attendance or poor punctuality, sometimes using electronic systems to track changes in attendance and communicate with parents or guardians early on.

Behaviour - changes in behaviour in lessons were monitored, recorded and sometimes reported.

Some schools had developed databases into which staff could input data on all these factors but some also reported having a good deal of data without good use being made of it. Dedicated non-teaching staff sometimes had a responsibility for monitoring the systems, interpreting data and warning relevant staff of any problems.

Support offered to young people was either universal (i.e. received by, or on offer to, all but the young person would need to take it up or ask for it) or targeted (specifically offered to a young person to address a particular need). Both types of support were offered across three broad areas:

- *Curriculum* - universal support included extra classes, coursework or homework, and internet revision sites while targeted support included booster lessons, sending work home, exams outside school, one-to-one mentoring.
- *Careers and options advice* - universal advice was from teachers or external services, whereas targeted support involved encouraging particular options choices that were thought appropriate.
- *Personal support* - universal support involved drop-in sessions with school counsellors or nurses whereas targeted support involved a range of personal help and advice and, in some cases, being assigned a truant officer.

Factors affecting the take-up and effectiveness of support included whether it was offered early enough, whether young people had sufficient engagement to take-up universal support or needed targeted support, the perceived relevance of what was on offer, timing and location of support, and staff relationships with pupils and approachability.

Impact on post-16 destinations

Compared to their total cohort, underachievers had distinctive post-16 destinations - they were less likely to be in school, slightly more likely to be in FE or work-based learning, and more likely to be NEET / JWT.

The extent to which young people perceived their attainment and school experiences to have impacted on their post-16 destinations varied. Those who had been unable to find employment or take desired routes were more likely to feel they had been limited by what occurred at KS4. However, in many cases, post-16 options gave young people a chance to re-engage in education and training, especially when causes of their original disengagement were removed.

Conclusions

A range of conclusions are drawn from the study, including:

- The causes and extent of disengagement are complex and early identification is key to providing effective support.
- Options in KS4 need to meet young people's interests and abilities. A wider curriculum with more vocational courses may help.
- Support during KS4 is often most effective when tailored to the individual and pro-actively offered early but this needs high levels of skill and resource. IAG is often particularly lacking once GCSE results are known.
- Engagement and attainment at KS4 is critical for post-16 participation. NEET / JWT outcomes were more likely for those whose attainment dropped between KS3 and KS4 than for those they had outperformed at KS3.
- Post-16 re-engagement is possible when young people have choice, autonomy and "adult" relationships with tutors. In raising the participation age, care must be taken not to replicate factors in the learning environment that contributed to disengagement.

Additional Information

The full report (DCSF-RR086) can be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from John Doherty, N6, DCSF, Moorfoot, Sheffield, S1 4PQ

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