Motivational patterns in disaffected school students: insights from pupil referral unit clients

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Abstract

This recently completed small-scale study investigated perceptions of the circumstances of pupils registered with Pupil Referral Units. Questionnaires were administered to all pupils registered, covering a range of perceptions of their current circumstances, history and prospects. The questionnaire also contained scales from the Patterns of Adaptive Learning Survey (Midgley *et al*., 1997), enabling assessments of pupil motivation. Interviews were conducted with a sample of pupils and practitioners who work with them. These included school teachers, tutorial centre teachers, and service managers. The paper explores the variety of views expressed and will conclude that there is little evidence to support the claim that disaffection experienced by these pupils is the result of an inappropriate curriculum. Rather, it reflects a deficiency of motivational and coping strategies perhaps not best dealt with in "out-of-school" contexts.

In an economic climate of increasing employer demands for a better educated and trained workforce and a matching emphasis by government on the need for post-16 education (DfEE 1997, 1999), disaffection in its broadest sense of being 'disengaged and dislocated from .. schooling opportunities' Kinder, Kendall, Halsey and Atkinson (1999:1) has become a topic of growing concern for both government (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999) and educationalists (Kinder *et al* 1995; 1996). While disaffection thus defined includes those pupils who will remain in school throughout the compulsory years but simply do not achieve there, there is considerable current concern regarding pupils at risk of exclusion from schooling, particularly within a climate of increased numbers of exclusions (Chief Inspector of Schools - OFSTED, 1996; Sanders & Hendry, 1997). The research reported here considers those pupils who have not been able to remain in school, either because they are excluded or because they have been directly referred to Pupil Referral Units, in some cases in order to reduce the risk of exclusion. While the relationship between the characteristics of this group and those of the wider group

of disaffected pupils is complex, it is nevertheless possible to gain an insight from a study of Pupil Referral Unit clients into motivation and the socio-emotional climate of mainstream schooling.

Pupil Referral Units and their clients

Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) became the collective term for a range of special units opened with increasing frequency in the 1970s and 1980s to accommodate pupils whose needs for a number of reasons could not be met in mainstream schooling. For writers such as Lloyd-Smith (Lloyd-Smith, 1984) the rapid growth of special units was driven by twin imperatives. First was the belief that mainstream schools would be handicapped in their function of advancing economic development by the presence of pupils who were disturbing in their behaviour. As shown by the Elton Report (Department of Education and Science, 1989) the modal form of problem behaviour is relatively low level but persistent and therefore ultimately highly disruptive. Such behaviour may often be understood by teachers as beyond the realm of intervention strategies operable within normal school. It was believed, therefore, that such disruptive pupils were best removed from mainstream school. The primary justification for such exclusion would be given in terms of the protection thus afforded to the interests of other pupils. Similar references to justifications for exclusions in terms of the benefits to others (other than the excluded pupil his/herself) are still dominant (Rogers & Solomon, 1998).

The second imperative behind the initial growth of PRUs is located more firmly within a discourse of concern for the excluded pupil. Here the prime intention identified by Lloyd-Smith was to provide a haven for the pupil where they could be supported in their efforts to develop more effective coping strategies. Thus units undertook a therapeutic role, often extending this into that of the “radical social worker” in which the principal objective is the giving of assistance to pupils seen to be the victims of an oppressive society. Their educational role was to ensure that even the most difficult child can receive the best available education, either by ensuring a prompt return to mainstream schooling or, importantly, by the provision of adequate alternative means. As in the case of the protection of other pupils, these roles remain visible in PRUs today (Rogers & Solomon, 1998; Sanders & Hendry, 1997), as do concerns about the quality of teacher-student relationships (Pomeroy, 1999).

The two imperatives are not necessarily in conflict nor mutually contradictory. However, the existence of such a variety of perspectives on the function of PRUs indicates a possible lack of clarity with respect to the nature of disaffection itself. 'Disaffection' is frequently used as an umbrella term for a variety of behaviours, attitudes and values, and solutions are correspondingly generalised, falling largely into the categories of addressing curriculum relevance and self esteem problems. This is most noticeable in practitioner accounts (Kinder *et al*, 1995; Rogers & Solomon, 1998). In this discussion paper we report on a small-scale study of PRU clients which aims at a greater differentiation in our understanding of disaffection.

Curriculum relevance issues

The provision of alternative means of education is a key issue in this context. Much recent research in mainstream environments suggests that disaffected pupils perceive school, and in particular the overtly academic National Curriculum, as unstimulating and irrelevant to their needs. Thus O'Keeffe's (1994) mass survey of truancy, supported by two NFER reports on disaffection (Kinder *et al*., 1995; 1996) suggested that a primary cause is the school curriculum: pupils were loath to attend classes in subjects which they disliked and considered boring, or that they experienced as stressful and difficult. Pupils suggested that the curriculum needed more interest, more practical activities and more choice, while teachers needed to show justice, patience, understanding, respect, humour and informality. Although pupils ranked teacher-pupil relationships above curriculum as a *cause* of disaffection, they placed curriculum changes at the top of the list of *solutions*. These opinions were underlined and elaborated by practitioners: in Kinder *et al.*'s (1995) study, disaffection was blamed on the National Curriculum by a wide range of school teachers, education welfare officers, special needs workers, police youth liaison officers and out-reach educationalists. Specifically, they pointed to the effects of new methods of assessment which produce what is considered to be a particularly disadvantaging combination of coursework and exam; emphasis on a 'grammar school curriculum' with very little choice and with no chance of success for low achievers; lack of time for pastoral care; and inappropriate pedagogy driven by the demands of the National Curriculum.

O'Keeffe's results do not convey any evidence of a particular hostility to education itself, and more than half of the self-reported truants said that they intended to carry on after 16 (including at colleges of FE). Acting on these data and those from the NFER studies involves taking the comments made by students in relation to curriculum relevance at face value, and one might expect that students given the chance to study a vocational curriculum would show a more positive attitude to education. Increasingly popular curriculum-related strategies for improving the situation include offering alternative vocational qualifications for lower achievers at Key Stage 4, both within mainstream schooling and in pupil referral service provision for some students being taught out of school. Such a solution addresses the first and most prominent finding reported – it assumes that if the curriculum can be made more relevant to the job market – and by implication more 'interesting' - then disaffection is less likely. However, this strategy ignores the observation that pupils also avoid or disrupt lessons that they find stressful or difficult, thus overlooking the possibility that disaffected pupils are those who experience particular difficulties in terms of their ability to meet the demands of school study, regardless of its content. While policy-makers and educational practitioners are acting on what pupils say about relevance and interest in offering a more vocational curriculum in place of those subjects which they dislike, they overlook the implications of pupil reports that the school curriculum is stressful or difficult: there may be individual characteristics which determine such an experience of schooling and which may suggest other solutions apart from – or in addition to - a move into vocational courses. This paper explores this further dimension of disaffection.

The PRU context

The student sample studied in this project was drawn entirely from students in Pupil Referral Units in Lancashire, N-W England with an age range of 13 years to 16 years. The operation of these PRUs will reflect the prevailing policies of the Local Education Authority in question and will differ in various respects from policies in practice elsewhere.

Administrative data was collected on 92 students, giving information on demographic details, referral history, offending and social service support histories, school histories and educational background. This data was obtained from existing records held by the LEA. For reasons connected to the LEA's policy concerning confidentiality, these records were searched by LEA staff and information extracted using a template prepared by the authors. Information was in fact patchy, partly due to recent re-structuring of the Pupil Referral Service in Lancashire and to its multi-agency nature (with its concomitant communication problems), but also due to the aims of the service which are, ostensibly, to return pupils to mainstream as soon as possible – thus records are frequently incomplete, and remain so.

The administrative data collected on the 92 PRU clients gives some indication of the representativeness of the sample with respect to the wider population of disaffected students in mainstream schooling. As we have noted above, it is difficult to be precise about what is meant by the much-used term 'disaffection' or indeed the application of the terms 'dislocation' and 'disengagement' and the degree to which these terms denote an active role for the student as implied by accounts which emphasise resistance to schooling (Munns & Mcfadden, 2000; Furlong, 1991; Carlen, Gleeson & Wardhaugh, 1992) or a passive one as suggested by social exclusion accounts (Reid, 1986; White, 1986). A major issue in this respect is the extent to which PRU clients are referred for reasons other than poor attendance and disruptive behaviour - clearly, teenage pregnancy, psychological problems and family problems do not necessarily denote disaffection. The administrative data providing the profile of these PRU clients would, however, suggest that they fall under the umbrella term of disaffection in terms of their problems at school, although they are clearly drawn from a significantly disadvantaged section of the community:

Forty-three students were excluded from school, eighteen on a permanent basis. Forty-nine were clearly identified as *not* being excluded from school. Exclusions were on record as justified on the basis of (a) behaviour that disrupts other students; (b) persistent refusal to abide by schools rules or to keep to an agreed school-student contract; (c) abuse to staff (generally verbal); (d) drug offences (three cases); (e) truancy; (f) possession of a weapon (one case). Referral without exclusion followed a similar pattern of references to (a) attendance problems; (b) work to be done prior to re-integration in the mainstream; (c) behavioural-attitudinal problems; (d) abuse directed to staff; (e) SEN (18 students); (f) assessment prior to integration in a new school. Information on CATS scores and attainment levels was generally not very detailed, but nine students were recorded as having depressed CATS scores and eleven were reported as having depressed SATs scores. Thirty-eight had been statemented, and a further nine students were in the process leading to a statement or had been in the process prior to referral. Seventeen were on record as being in the FE sector

following a wide range of courses, mostly of a vocational nature such as catering and hairdressing; two were following GCSE courses. Attendance in the FE sector was also variable: four students were rated as having good attendance, two as problematic, two as poor and one as improving.

In terms of background and socio-economic status, four of the 92 students were in care, twenty-five students had been the subject of a referral to the social services, and seventeen were on record as being known to the police; seven students had a drug related incident in their record. Fifty-three were on record as either having a current or a relatively recent entitlement to free school meals, and twelve students were recorded as living in a single parent home. Thirteen had references to significant familial dysfunctionality or disruption, seven had a record of family health problems, four were recorded as being members of families of four or more children, two had a record a family violence and ten of family unemployment. Two students were recorded as living away from their family with boy/girlfriends and three were recorded as either living with or having a particularly close relationship with grandparents.

Fifty-six of the students whose records were examined were male and thirty-five were female. All but two students were identified as White: one was Afro-Caribbean and one was identified as 'other'.

Survey data was also collected from a questionnaire seeking a range of information on Year 10 and 11 students' attitudes towards schooling, their current situation, their future and their motivational patterns. The response rate to the questionnaire was low with only 67 being returned out of a total of three hundred across the County, giving a response rate of 22%. The low response rate means that all the data has to be considered with caution. It is not possible for us to make any firm statements about the reasons for the low response and therefore the impact upon the generalisability of the results to the population as a whole. Obtaining high response rates will always be problematic with groups such as the one under consideration here. What is particularly unclear is whether those who did respond were the least disaffected of the population (which would have clear implications for generalisability) or whether those who responded did so due to the particular way in which the questionnaire had reached them (which would have a less clear impact on the interpretations that may be made). The results will therefore be presented at face value. The reader must bear these caveats in mind and accept that any findings are provisional and require replication with a more clearly representative sample.

In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative data were collected in the form of tape-recorded interviews with a sub-sample of six students attending three different Pupil Referral Units, and with 16 practitioners and managers from the Pupil Referral Service and colleges of Further Education (which take some pupils in Year 11) including: four out of school tutors (including two team leaders), two PRS area team leaders, one teacher responsible for the alternative curriculum and two head teachers from schools with high concentrations of at risk students, an educational welfare officer, a senior youth justice worker, the head of outreach services, a careers advisor, the Dean of schools liaison in a local FE college, a senior lecturer

concerned with schools liaison in FE, and an educational psychologist. The design of the client group interviews was driven by our concern with five major issues that can be related to the research literature:

- Teacher-student relationships: experiences, ideals and institutional differences;
- Curriculum: its relevance and delivery, and the value of vocational education;
- Environment: contrast between tutor group, FE and school environments;
- Peers: friendship groups, peer-related problems such as bullying and perceived differences and similarities;
- Clients' accounts of how they came to be in tutor groups or in Year 11 FE.

Interviews were conducted during lesson time at each student's Pupil Referral Unit by one of the authors in quiet rooms provided by the PRU tutors. Practitioners were interviewed by an experienced contract researcher in their place of work about their role in the Pupil Referral Service and their views on the nature of disaffection and its solutions in this particular client group. The analysis of both groups of interviews involved the identification of common themes across respondents. This was most straightforward in the case of practitioner interviews that dealt with a number of clearly defined topics which respondents were able to cover without hesitation. The 6 student interviews involved a more open discussion in which the interviewer probed for information and opinion and queried apparent contradictions in responses (for example, respondents frequently referred to subjects as 'boring' but elsewhere in their interview stated their liking for such subjects - such discrepancies were probed for further explanation). Analysis of these data involved a more complex procedure of coding which involved the generation of category sets (e.g., attitude to teachers, ideal teacher, preferred work mode, future plans) which were partly prompted by the literature and the interview topic guide structure. Once coded, the data were re-sorted to address issues and distinctions that arose in the initial categorisation (e.g., in terms of sense of control over future outcomes). Clearly, the small number of student interviews means that we cannot make major claims on the basis of such data, but cross-matching of the quantitative and qualitative data - which were analysed by the two authors independently - was illuminating with respect to the issue of agency and choice, as we discuss below.

Vocational education – a solution for disaffected pupils?

Gaining information from PRU contexts enables a particular assessment of the issue of curriculum relevance because attendance at a College of Further Education is an option for referred Year 10 and 11 pupils. Our expectation in this study was that we would receive a number of enthusiastic replies like the following:

> *[FE is] … not like school because you're working all the time with your hands instead of putting things down on paper all the time … when I've done some sampling it was alright because there's just three people working to a bench and the teacher watching us and helping us a lot … they treat you more like adults at college than they do at school.* (Peter, Lancashire Pupil Referral Unit student, aged 15)

Accounts such as this one are very much what one might expect from previous research – it sums up a disaffected student who appreciates the egalitarian teacher-pupil relationships, practical and job-relevant skills acquisition and individual 'apprenticeship' teaching style of Further Education. However, it was the only such account in the case study interviews. Significantly, Peter went on to say that, although he preferred practical subjects such as woodwork, cookery and art, he did recognise the value of maths and science in the job market, and he also agreed that school was a good preparation for work. The picture that emerged from the case studies and the survey data was more complex than the simple academic versus vocational education divide suggested by earlier researchers, and reflected in much practitioner discourse. In the interviews, views on curriculum were based variously on a dislike of school in general, liking/dislike for particular subject teachers and a preference for more active subjects, but the majority of informants were not personally interested in any form of education, however 'relevant' or practical. The survey data on the other hand showed that respondents saw the school curriculum as relevant to jobs and life in general, and that, while they agreed that gaining qualifications was a good thing, work carried out in school had some intrinsic value that went beyond this immediate prospect. Contrary to predictions, these PRU students did not in principle reject the academic curriculum, nor did they aspire to a vocational training in FE, either in Year 11 or beyond. To make sense of these findings, we turn to the data on individual differences.

Individual differences

The concept of a *school career* (Waterhouse, 1992) enables a view of the school experience both in terms of movement through the years with their new demands and turning points and in terms of changes in self-image and self-identity and in the meanings attached to relationships with peers and teachers. School-based changes such as increasing competition within classrooms which ten years ago occurred in the junior years of schooling (Rogers, 1990) but could now be pin-pointed as beginning in the infant years (Dweck 1996) and as a direct result of SATs tests (Reay & Wiliam, 1999) may set in train a process of disaffection which, while initially an individual response, is later mediated through peer cultures and finds a focus in criticism of teacher-pupil relationships and curriculum irrelevance (see, for instance Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Disaffection from school is usefully seen as part of an on-going school career in which a number of agencies play a part, as influences on expectations and aspirations, and as more general cultural influences. Often, influences conflict - White (1986), describing the parents of persistent truants, argues that they are frequently ambivalent in their attitudes to schooling, both supporting it as an agent of discipline and criticising it as worthless in practical terms. These findings, together with our own analysis of the ambiguity of responses towards the curriculum, suggest a need for more detailed examination of young people's perceptions of school and of their place as individuals within it. The interview and survey data on motivational patterns in this study can be set against the curriculum issues to suggest that proposed solutions to disaffection should instead address individual differences.

Individual differences in motivational patterns

Recent research into motivational processes in the school context has placed a substantial emphasis on the goals held by pupils. There are a number of variants on the theme (see Elliot and Harackiewicz, 1996; Nolen, 1996; Jagacinski, 1992; Wentzel, 1991; Nicholls, 1989). Amongst

other things this research has demonstrated that pupils in school will work with a number of goals and that these each have differing associations with more or less adaptive work patterns which underlie different reactions to school experiences. Thus *learning goals* tend to be associated with higher levels of intrinsic motivation for the task itself and with a variety of more adaptive learning strategies. *Performance goals* tend to place a greater emphasis on the display of competence. Performance approach goals are concerned with a desire to find opportunities to demonstrate one's competence relative to others, while performance avoidance goals are concerned with attempting to ensure that relative incompetence is not displayed. These latter performance avoidance goals are particularly likely to be associated with a range of strategies in the classroom that will have the effect of lowering attainment levels and increasing disaffection.

Research has also developed an interest in the role of the causal attributions made by individuals for their own success and failure experiences. By looking at the way in which individuals account for these experiences it is possible to arrive at estimates of their likely motivational responses. For example, the tendency to attribute failure to stable and uncontrollable causes, such as a relatively low level of ability, is likely to be associated with a poor motivational response to the experience of difficulty. If the failure is caused by something that is itself unlikely to change, then further failure has to be expected. By the same token, attribution to causes that can be influenced encourages a greater sense of personal agency.

Closely related to both of these approaches is the key notion of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy is seen as a highly situation specific set of beliefs concerning the degree to which an individual both believes that they know what needs to be done in order to achieve a goal, and that they have the capacity to carry these actions out. Self-efficacy can be reduced therefore, either by lacking information about the nature of appropriate goal related strategies, or through a lack of confidence in one's own ability to execute them. Issues of personal agency and strategy as manifested in measures of self-efficacy suggest a key to understanding disaffection in terms of the patterns of individual pupils' responses to the curriculum and practitioner assessments of their needs.

Motivational patterns and the curriculum

The major recent studies of disaffection (O'Keeffe, 1994; Kinder *et al.*, 1996) suggest that pupils are likely to avoid or disrupt lessons which they find not only boring and irrelevant but also stressful or difficult – in O'Keeffe's study these were English, Maths and Science in particular. Survey data from the present study indicate that, while disaffected pupils perceive lessons as somewhat boring, they do consider them to be relevant, along with the general objective of gaining qualifications. Furthermore, work carried out in school is seen as having some intrinsic value that goes beyond the prospect of gaining qualifications, as illustrated in Table I.

Table I. Attitudes towards the school curriculum

Item*	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Getting good qualifications is important	66	4.15	1.46
The stuff you learn at school is really important	65	3.58	1.39
Things you learn help you to have a better life even without qualifications	66	3.55	1.42
We learn things that are worth knowing	66	3.41	1.42
The things we learn are only useful for passing exams	66	2.71	1.42
We learn things that will help me get a good job	66	3.38	1.25
Lessons in school are boring	66	3.17	1.50

*All items were rated on a scale of 1 – 5 with 5 indicating agreement with the statement.

Students in Pupil Referral Units were also asked to rate themselves in terms of their relative competence in English, Maths and Science. Each student was asked to describe themselves as being better, the same as or worse than others of their age, in their usual school, at each subject. Table II shows the frequencies of each response.

Table II. Pupils' ratings of their abilities in comparison to others in their usual school

Subject		Better than most	Same as most	Worse than most
Maths	**Number**	12	43	10
	Percent	19	66	15
English	**Number**	9	44	11
	Percent	14	69	17
Science	**Number**	10	37	17
	Percent	16	58	27

The majority of respondents see themselves as being much the same as their peers, with a tendency for slightly lower levels of confidence to be expressed in science. Between fourteen and eighteen per cent actually see themselves as being better than others in these three subjects, contrary to expectations that might be based on their present situation. There is no evidence here, then, to support the view that these students see themselves as being particularly lacking in ability in the main areas of the national curriculum. However, an examination of these students' motivational characteristics on two measures presents a more complex picture that suggests that disaffected individuals may share similar motivational patterns.

The first of these examines the attributions made for a recent success and a recent failure in the school context. Students were asked to rate the importance of each of the following causes of their chosen success and failure on a five point scale with a higher score indicating greater importance: effort, ability; luck; help from teachers; work strategy; difficulty level of the work. Table III shows the ratings obtained.

Table III. Attributions made for a recent success and a recent failure in the school context

Success *	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
I did well because I worked hard	63	3.51	1.33
I did well because I have ability in this type of work	61	3.16	1.24
I did well because I was lucky	62	2.50	1.24
I did well because of the help I got from teachers	64	3.02	1.40
I did well because I thought carefully about how to do the work	62	3.81	1.20
I did well because the work I had was easy	62	3.23	1.23
Failure	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
I did badly because I didn't work hard enough	64	3.17	1.45
I did badly because I don't have ability in this type of work	64	2.94	1.26
I did badly because I was unlucky	64	2.50	1.35
I did badly because the teachers didn't help me enough	64	2.69	1.38
I did badly because I didn't think carefully about how to do the work	65	3.37	1.51
I did badly because the work I had to do was too hard	63	2.90	1.30

*All items were rated on a scale of 1 – 5 with 5 indicating agreement with the statement.

Figure 1 (overleaf) aids interpretation of these results.

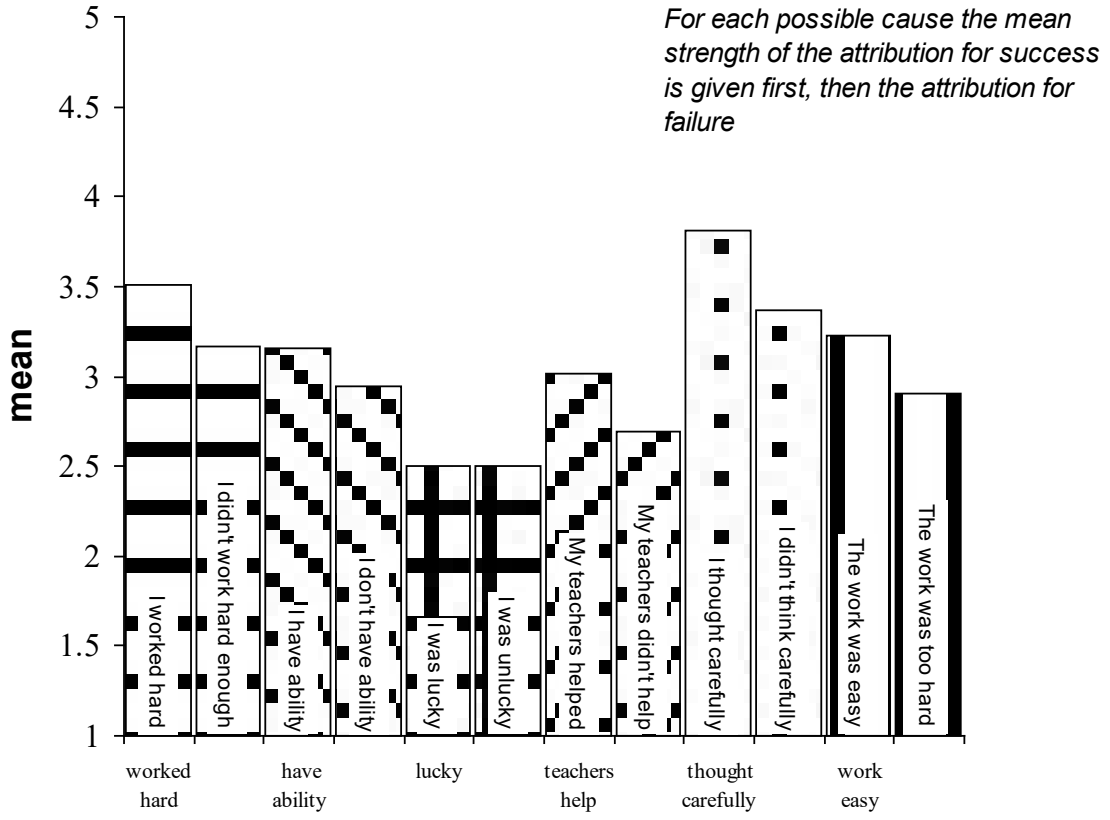

Figure 1. attributions for success and failure

Importantly, these students see the effectiveness of the strategies they have adopted as major determinants of both success and failure. In a similar vein there is a relative stress on effort; while ability does not dominate the attributions for success. Luck is generally not seen to be important in keeping with other reports of attributions from school contexts. These attributional patterns are generally considered to be motivationally adaptive. One possible sign of a less than adaptive pattern is the tendency to give relatively high weightings to the role of the ease, or difficulty of the task. Such an attributional response can be seen as diminishing the students' recognition of their own role in determining success and failure outcomes. The ease of the task is seen as being as important as the students' ability in bringing about success. Such a response does not help to develop a positive sense of self-esteem. However, it needs to be stressed that the overall interpretation here is that these attributional patterns are quite adaptive and generally "healthy".

We will next examine the data from the PALS scales, which have been used to assess the motivational goals that seem to be important to the students in this sample. Table IV shows the reliability coefficient for each scale together with the mean score and standard deviation obtained

here. For comparison, and to aid interpretation, we have included the mean score and SD of the responses of the original samples on which the scales were validated.

Table IV. PALS scales scores

Scale	Alpha	Mean	S.D.	Standard Mean	Standard S.D.
Learning goal	.87	3.03	1.19	3.45	1.02
Performance approach	.90	2.93	1.32	2.68	1.08
Performance avoidance	.86	2.90	1.14	2.41	.91
Self-efficacy	.88	3.55	1.08	4.18	.67
Self-handicapping	.79	2.61	1.19	2.09	1.01
Home-school dissonance	.74	2.86	.97	2.21	.81

The alpha co-efficients are all acceptably high indicating that the items have functioned reliably as a scale. Comparison of the data from our sample and the standard sample can only be used to give an indicative sense of the meaning of the scores. It will be noted that the degree of variability in response, as shown by the S.D., is relatively high in this sample. This sample has a somewhat lower learning goal scores and higher performance orientations. That is, they are relatively more concerned with how they compare with others than they are with the learning of the material *per se*. Of particular note is the low self-efficacy score. The students in the sample see themselves as being less able to bring about the outcomes they would desire. They are also more likely to use self-handicapping strategies and to have a greater dissonance between home and school. However, with the exception of self-efficacy, none of the variations from the standardisation sample are exceptionally large. The low level of self-efficacy however, needs to be seen as a potentially significant impediment to any attempts to re-engage this sample in academic work.

Agency and choice

> *A 'difficult' student would be somebody who always blamed somebody else for their problems* (Lecturer dealing with Year 11 placements, College of Further Education)

Low self-efficacy was reflected in the case study interviews in the form of a lack of a sense of agency or choice. Respondents were asked to give an account at the beginning of the interview as to how they had come to be at the tutor group, and were probed for ideas about whose 'fault' it was that they were where they were. They were also asked about what they would want to change if they could have their school years again, and how they could go about avoiding trouble in the future. Finally, we asked them about their future plans for

college and work. Our intention here was to gain some picture of whether these students were able to act strategically and realistically in planning their lives, whether they were motivated to continue education, whether they were sufficiently self-reflective to execute plans and avoid pitfalls, and whether they saw themselves as self-determining and responsible for their own actions.

Their accounts of their pathways to their current situations were all similar in that they largely blamed teachers and/or uncontrollable aspects of themselves – attention deficit disorder, having a temper, getting into a mood, being stressed. Although all agreed that they would prefer not to be in their current situation, none were able to tell us how they might have avoided being in it, even with hindsight – they tended to portray themselves as people to whom things happen which are largely out of their control. They also presented an unworried and unrealistic view of the future that sometimes approached self-protection:

> *Q: is it worth working hard at school in order to get a decent job?*
> *A: [It's a] waste of time. Cos you can get good jobs anyway, you can get jobs without qualifications …*
> *Q: What sort?*
> *A: Don't know. But I went up to the job centre with someone I know and there was hundreds of jobs that said no qualifications needed and they were all good pay ……..*
> *I'll be richer than Richard Branson. I'll be owning all of Virgin sort of thing and I'll be Richard Branson the second. …. and if it all goes wrong I'll just get a job.* (Darren, Lancashire Pupil Referral Unit, aged 14)

Like others in the case study sub-sample, Darren did not want to go to college, and did not perceive it as much of an improvement on school. Indeed, students without any clear vocational direction were described by practitioners as unlikely to succeed in FE:

> *We are looking for motivation and commitment. We are different to a school therefore we can deal with students who want a different deal to the one they get in school. But we can only deal with those not interested in school, we have difficulties with those who are not interested in education.* (School Liaison Officer, College of Further Education)

> *We can only help those who are motivated. [It's] better to have students who have had careers advice and have a goal.* (Lecturer dealing with Year 11 placements, College of Further Education)

Success in FE

Practitioners' views on the FE option are illuminating because they underline the contrast between outcomes for students who have clear ideas of what they want to do in the future (and therefore what vocational route they might want to follow) and those who do not.

> *We feel that kids must be suitable for this option. They are selected for this. Not all potential problem students would be referred. We select students with particular skills such as motor mechanics. Students who do not have a strong vocational direction do not seem to achieve there.* (Teacher with alternative curriculum responsibility, high PRS–referring Lancashire school in a depressed area)
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> *Youngsters need a careers idea in mind to succeed here [in FE]. The ones who leave the college courses are often those who do not have a career plan. [They] need a strong vocational focus. Having done work experience can be useful - it provides this focus. Quite often it is the idea of work which interests these pupils rather than education.* (Careers Advisor, Lancashire)

A limited number of PRU students are given places in Colleges of Further Education in their final year of compulsory schooling. However, practitioners were wary of a blanket FE/vocational training solution to disaffection. Overall, when FE was successful they attributed this to largely non-curriculum-based reasons - good relationships with students compared with school, an opportunity for a fresh start and for motivation to develop, the opportunity to concentrate on a chosen topic and – most importantly - a connection with jobs (often in terms of networking into employment rather than skills learned). FE was presented and experienced, then, as a means to an end rather than as an experience with intrinsic educational value.

Conclusion: vocational education, the problem of self-esteem and the employment background

Labour market trends, educational reform and youth employment and training legislation in the late 1980's and the 1990's have resulted in a growing participation in post-16 education and a consequent extended transitional period for the majority of young people (Kiernan, 1992; Gray *et al.*, 1993). These trends have underlined the vulnerability of those young people who do not attend school and who, consequently, leave statutory provision with no qualifications. Employment trends indicate that vocational education is not a solution in terms of the job market either. Recession and changes in the nature of work mean that employers now expect a well-educated workforce who will enter the labour market at a later stage in their lives and who will retrain and change career at several points (Ashton *et al*., 1990; Beck, 1992). Mortimore *et al.* (1988) suggest that schools should place an emphasis on academic achievement for all pupils in the school irrespective of ability: allowing children to label themselves as non-academic may be unhelpful in the long run.

Indeed, the data reported here suggest a need for caution in implementing curriculum-focussed strategies for reducing disaffection. While some schools have worked within existing statutory requirements to support student learning through teaching styles development and organisational changes such as homework clubs and tutorial support, others are moving towards the introduction of vocational qualifications (Kinder *et al*., 1995). Pupil referral units necessarily use

different teaching styles which are generally more supportive of pupils but lack focus of the sort suggested by the data reported here. As this preliminary look at motivational patterns in a particular group of disaffected pupils indicates, there is scope for the development of carefully sequenced programmes containing a number of proximal academic goals. As a recommendation for practice this would follow more or less directly from the basics of self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997) in which a considerable emphasis is placed on the importance of proximal, rather than distal goals. Naturally the earlier such interventions can begin the better.

However, there is one other aspect of self-efficacy theory that we would like to give a particular emphasis to in this conclusion. Self-efficacy is seen to be situation specific. An individual has a sense of self-efficacy in relation to particular activities and particular goals in specified contexts. It follows from this that attempts to raise self-efficacy are likely to be more effective if they too share these various specified contexts. Similar observations emerge from recent work in self-esteem (Marsh, 1994) where self-perceptions of a somewhat different kind are also seen to be closely related to context. Marsh and his colleagues have also demonstrated (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997) that changes to self-esteem derived from activities in a different context than the target one are perhaps only likely to happen if the intervention experience is radical and fairly extreme.

Many teachers and other support workers work with a much more generalised and undifferentiated model of self-perceptions than is supported by this literature – a number of practitioners in our sample made comments on the need to raise *general* self-esteem and increase *general* motivation, and they perceived this as a major task of Pupil Referral Units and a related positive outcome of attending FE. This is illustrated by the following practitioner comments:

> *[There are a] lot of problems caused by literacy difficulties which makes secondary education a failing experience. [It] results in low self-esteem - they don't see a future.* (Pupil Referral Service Area Team Leader)

> *FE is particularly good for those who are good at one thing such as sport or computers. [We] can concentrate on this area to build up confidence and self-esteem.* (Lecturer dealing with Year 11 placements, FE College)

Pupil Referral Unit tutors reported that, while academic achievement was an ideal, qualifications were their last priority – before they could embark on these there was a lot of work to be done on motivation, developing concentration and general behavioural improvement.

> *[The Pupil Referral Service is] best able to help those whose problems stem from educational issues ... or those who lack self-esteem.* (Teacher with alternative curriculum responsibility, high PRS–referring Lancashire school in a depressed area)

However, research on self-esteem and self-efficacy raises questions regarding such general aims and, relatedly, the ultimate effectiveness of out of school provision for seriously

disaffected pupils. We would not wish to make recommendations for specific practice on the basis of this study; to do so would be clearly inappropriate. However, we would wish to argue that the findings reported here, and the theoretical and research basis to which they refer and from which they draw, support the view that interventions designed to assist disaffected pupils need to be located within the context of regular schooling itself. They should be aimed at raising self-efficacy in specific curriculum areas rather than at a general raising of self-esteem.

It is, of course, recognised that the removal of a pupil to a PRU serves purposes other than those directly and uniquely concerned with the well being of the referred pupil. Other aspects of our data reveal that the most common reason offered for referral was the need to protect the interests of other pupils at school from the disruptive influence of the referee and to offer a supportive counselling-type environment. However, effective interventions need to recognise the limits of such motives and seek to relocate referred pupils into mainstream classes and a mainstream curriculum as early as possible.

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