ASPIRATION, IDENTITY AND SELF-BELIEF IN “DISENGAGED” STUDENTS

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Introduction
This paper reflects on some of the findings of a research project supported by a small British Academy grant, and applies a model of aspiration formation to “disengaged students”. The project’s original purpose was to “investigate” or “confirm” the use of social capital by middle class families in supporting the educational and other development of their children, with a view to considering whether analogous resources could and should be developed for young people from other social backgrounds and (and help decide whether schools could have a role in this). Although there are findings concerning social capital, this paper is principally concerned with the formation of aspiration and its connection with identity.

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Background to the research
The research is part of an ongoing personal, professional and academic interest in reducing the disadvantages of working class students in UK schools and the education system generally. As part of this, how can the mechanisms conferring advantage on middle class students (of which there
are many accounts: see Ball 2003, Power et al 2003, Riddell 2003) be neutralised or replicated for others? And is this possible in terms of social structure?

In my own previous work (Riddell 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007a) I have drawn on Pollard with Filer’s model of epistemic identity (1996), deriving from the iterative, social and cyclical nature of learning. I have used it to show how the relationship between the nature of learning experiences in school, and those which take place in the other contexts of young people’s lives – family, peer group (in school and outside), and community (virtual and physical) - disproportionately advantages middle class children in their classroom learning. Middle class children move seamlessly from one social learning context to another, because the “rules of the game” and how they are expressed are the same in each; middle class children therefore have a “feel for the game” (Grenfell & James1998: 19) in each. In individual terms, the resources (broadly, capitals – Bourdieu 1986) they bring to each new learning encounter are attuned to the field; in learning terms, previous learning easily transfers (Claxton 1999).

Correspondingly, where young people do not move so seamlessly between the different contexts of their lives into the classroom, because the nature of their capitals is not so well-attuned to the classroom context (for example, their modes of learning, expected behaviours, linguistic expectations and expressions, and relations between adults and children), they are cyclically and cumulatively disadvantaged in school learning and outcome (Riddell 2003, 2007a). This is amplified if there are large numbers of such children, often concentrated in schools at the bottom of stratified urban school systems (Riddell, 2003, 2007a), or “bottom strata schools”.

Further, we know that the social capital mobilised by middle class parents on behalf of their children, in pursuit of their constructed “life projects” (Ball 2003), can be focused on social, educational and occupational outcomes, in contrast to that possessed by working class parents, who do not necessarily have such developed strategies for participating in the education market (Ball at al 1995) and whose social capital may be focused on more “mundane” matters, such as “getting by” (see, for example, Gillies’ 2007 account of working class mothering).

So the principal questions for the research were:

- how do middle class parents use their social capital in this way;
- is there a practical or structural possibility of developing analogous resources for children from working class backgrounds;
- do current national strategies see the development of such resources as sensible or a priority;

1 A loose definition or usage of the term social capital is employed for now in this paper, broadly the same as Putnam’s (2000) or Halpern’s (2005), that is, resources contained in and derived from networks. The inscribed nature of social capital, in terms of social structure, and hence the “real meaning” of middle class parental activity a la Bourdieu (ibid.), is not considered here.
- could schools have a role in the development of such resources?

Reflection on the findings from this research, and the cycle of reproduction, has led to the development of a notion of “aspirational identity”. It is applied in this paper to “disengaged” students, defined in more detail below.

Research design
The core of the research activity funded by the British Academy was a series of (49) structured interviews as follows:

- *With parents and staff at two independent schools* in different parts of England: a co-educational school of about 700 pupils in the south west and a boys’ school in the north west of England with about 1500 on roll. The focus of questioning for staff was on the motivational work undertaken with young people in the schools – how they raise aspirations and help form them, if they do. The focus for parents was on the development of aspiration, with whom these were discussed, and the use of external support (i.e. family, friends or acquaintances, websites, other information services).

- *With senior central government officials* in the DfES (now the DCFS), H.M. Treasury and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (now the DCLG). The focus was on which policies were concerned with reducing educational disadvantage, how they were arrived at, what their key “drivers” were, and the potential role of social capital formation.

- *With local and other coordinators of national programmes*. These included a geographical spread of coordinators of the Excellence in Cities gifted and talented strand, staff in the National Academy for Gifted and Talented Youth (then at Warwick University), and regional staff in AimHigher. The focus for these interviews was the mechanisms employed in each to raise, and most importantly, sustain “higher” aspirations once raised.

- *With admissions tutors and staff* at two Russell Group and one post-92 universities, all from different faculty areas. The focus for these interviews was on their advertised criteria for admission for undergraduates, the processes for determining whether potential students had met these criteria, and for offering places, and how they responded to students with “academic potential” who may not present as suitable;

- *With a variety of staff and enthusiasts* from national (eg Connexions, the Prince’s Trust) and local organisations (in the voluntary sector), usually dealing with “hard to reach” groups of young people. The focus of questioning here was about what seemed to work, the nature of aspiration for their “clients” and how or whether these could be changed, raised and sustained; the potential role of social capital.

Parents’ perspectives on the development of aspiration
The parents’ views will be summarised here and illustrated with selected quotes. A fuller account was presented to BERA last year (Riddell 2007b, available on the web) and the full findings will be available in due course (Riddell, in preparation). Colleagues who have read last year’s paper can now skip to page 8, for the explanation of the notion of aspirational identity.
The parental sample was quite small – from 11 families over the two schools – as it was intended to be illustrative rather than definitive, given the data already existing on these issues. The parents were also chosen by the schools concerned. Thus, being seen, even tacitly, as good parents, together with the fact that the parents knew they were to be interviewed in connection with the development of their children’s aspirations, may have led to some overstatement of their parental proactivity. Nevertheless, the picture which emerged from these three or four days of interviews was one of a securely “managed” and “planned” process of social reproduction – really impressively so - albeit not without its crises from time to time, just as Sally Power and her colleagues (2003) found. The parents were largely middle class\(^2\), though this is not essential to the analysis in this paper. The parents also discussed their children who were not in the particular schools in question and this included siblings at state schools and those who had attended university, successfully or otherwise.

The main findings from these interviews were as follows:

1. **Ambition and “life projects”** Although parents had not planned specific trajectories for their children, often a type of appropriate trajectory was assumed (ie to reproduction of position). Most commonly, this included university (as in Reay et al 2005), either specifically as an aspiration in itself, or incidental to discussions about careers which required graduate status. This theme occurred time after time, as in this very representative exchange with a parent at the school in the northwest:

   ‘I think education has been the main thing: that’s been my priority, to get him a good education and good opportunities. I do hope he’ll go to university, I think that would be a brilliant experience and the right thing for him to do. Beyond that…’

   **Interviewer:** So it’s assumed he’s going to university, is it?

   ‘Yes, I hope so, yes, he’s an academic child, he enjoys studying and hopefully we’ll find a way of getting him into university… he’s always been interested in history and classics right from the start – it’s always been his favourite subject.’

2. **Active parenting; “presenting the possibilities”** Despite the possibility of overstating their role, the authentic and corroborated illustrations from parents’ experience shows that parenting was proactive in this group. All the parents interviewed were engaged in “encouraging” their children down certain paths. Even if the actual choice of career was left to them, signs of indecision or uncertainty, or difficulty in making a decision, would lead to reported family involvement in sometimes extensive discussions to try and “construct” or “re-construct” an appropriate trajectory, to ensure the young person did the right thing, worked sufficiently hard, got the most out of school

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\(^2\) both the parent interviewed and the one who was generally absent, in the sense of having “privileged work and market situations … (not being) closely supervised at work (but)… trusted to use initiative and discretion” (Roberts 2001: 145).
and made the appropriate moves and choices. It was hoped the trajectory, leading to the appropriate aspiration, would then “emerge” from the process.

The following is a good example of such intentions to intervene:

‘Oh yeah, we went and we did the thing, and we did the sheet and the fors and the againsts, and we looked at the security, and how far you’d have to walk, and how far your money would go and all those sorts of things to make the decision. J---- is not so easy, because I say: ‘which are we going to look at?’ And he sort of just mumbles… So I’ve given him, in my mind … I was talking about it last night actually … I’ve given him until his last AS and then I’m on his case in a sort of nice way.’

Parenting is of the sort described by Gewirtz (2001). These parents aspire to be the model active middle class consumers and users of education, as skilled “home educators”, as Gewirtz describes it (p373). This other parent gives an example of what she does:

‘If you want good for your child, you have to present them with the possibility of being able to do their homework and being able to have time and effort. And I sit with my children and I do their homework with them, as I’m doing the dinner; I’ll go over my son’s French with him, or his spelling with him… and this is the point you’re getting to, isn’t it…?’

Discussion with children about their aspirations featured prominently in the interviews.

3. Drawing on social capital These parents did draw on social capital - their families’, schools’ and other contacts - to help them navigate their children’s trajectories, particularly at key decision making points. This was illustrated time after time.

Examples included: the development of specific career ideas from other children at school (and their “successful” parents); the same from influential teachers; helping an individual recover from rejection by a professional football club; getting the right work experience; seeking educational or, in one case, legal advice at particular points of difficulty; drawing opinions and advice from continual discussions in networks of friends and acquaintances, in churches, other settings and (in one case) a sports club; immersing their children in such contexts where they could meet peers developing similarly “appropriate” aspirations; using friends and family members and relatives who had specific professional or occupational backgrounds or expertise (or often who knew someone who had); and sometimes drawing on the same as a source of alternative advice to the schools’.

A number of parents mentioned the process of applying for university in this connection, and an amazing number in one school in connection with applying for Cambridge. This is one worth quoting at length:

‘…and my parents both went to Cambridge and my godparents. My godfather is Professor of E---- at Cambridge. So for instance last night I was,
well I did ... last night they came back with this Cambridge form and the teacher said if you haven’t got anything positive to say on the square ..., don’t put anything in it. So I thought ‘that’s a bit odd, if they don’t put anything... it doesn’t look very keen if you don’t put anything else’, so I rang up my godfather and said ‘what do you think here, should we put something in this space? And if so, what should I put?’ So I do, you know, (use contacts) and then his teacher here said ‘don’t apply to Y (College) because um, that’s really difficult to get into, it’s very popular, go for one of the rubbish ones’ or something. He said to M--- (her son - RR) ‘go for one of the rubbish colleges’, so I said ‘what does he think one of the rubbish colleges at Cambridge is?’, so that didn’t make sense to me.

'Well, I said to my godfather ‘what have you got to say on this as well? You know, is St. John’s too ambitious, should we try somewhere else, does it make any difference, I thought there was a pool system blah, blah’. And he said ‘no, just tell him to apply for Y (College); if they want him at Cambridge they will offer ... put him in the pool. Do that'.

And others, such as this one, in connection with arranging work experience:

'Ve did discuss work experience with somebody, with a friend who works for Rothschild’s, um, for my daughter, but they only do university-type ones anyway.'

Drawing on these capitals, which are of course inscribed in social structure, or the circumstances giving rise to their own social position, advantages their children in turn.

The role of the schools
The wishes and hopes of the parents interviewed were reflected in what the school staff interviewed considered they provided for their children – there is in this sense a perfect market match. The findings, again, were presented more fully at BERA in 2007 (Riddell 2007b), but one of the key ones was that the “institutional habitus” (Reay et al 2005) of these two quite different schools was focused on enabling the small successive steps to gaining university entry to be understood and then taken. Interestingly, these were described by these interviewees in a similar manner to those found in “state schools with good track records of entry into prestigious UK universities” (Curtis et al 2008).

There is a “thread” of activities and features in each of the schools which is constitutive of their institutional habitus. These include: a relentless focus in school events on achievement in the broadest sense; the focus of individual staff on academic achievement, preparation for university and good subject choice there (very often leading to emulation); links maintained by staff, particularly heads of department, with “top universities”; the head of sixth form, supported by sixth form tutors, guiding students through the various stages of the UCAS process (choosing, applying for and being admitted to university), all of which are laid out in detail and coached (for example, timetabled periods on how to complete the UCAS form); the use of outside speakers – often including alumni – to emphasise (very often professional) goals, and show how “people like you” can achieve them (i.e. former students at this school, with whom current ones could identify); and putting on careers
and attending university conferences, emphasising the higher education route. Obviously much of this reflects the strength and particular natures of the schools' own social capital.

This was described as a “drip-feed process” by the head of sixth form at one of the schools.

Influencing the other contexts of young people’s lives
Between these two distinct sets of adults largely working together, the young people themselves may be considered to have little room for manoeuvre. However, parents (and school staff) were also keenly aware of the other contexts outside the controlled ones of the classroom, school and home, where less desirable influences may be experienced by their children and less appropriate outlooks developed as a consequence. These other contexts included various peer groups – formal and informal at school, in the community (including different adults as well here), and web-borne virtual ones.

In addition to the above, parents not only expressed their awareness of such contexts, but their desires to influence them actively. These comments arose in the course of discussion about other matters, but there were so many of them, they constitute an interesting set of data in themselves.

The most important “other” context is peer group, or more specifically, the group of young people children learn, meet and socialise with because of their circumstances. A number of parents made it quite clear that their choice of a selective independent school involved consciously choosing a specific peer group for their children to learn with, because they were “studious”, “highly able”, or “academic”. And they wanted their children to be with “children like them”:

‘…Since he’s been here he has been very happy; he’s found a niche here of similar boys: they’re all fairly studious and quiet and that’s the good thing about (this school), you can find your niche. Particularly once you start your options, you tend to be channelled with kids with the same sort of … generally similar boys, you know. So he’s been alright in secondary school … but primary school was dreadful for him’.

These parents felt their choice of school also made possible an enhanced capability of influencing the peer group in which they socialised. One described it as follows in terms of a boarding element at one of the schools:

‘…coming to an independent school they come from all over the country, and so for kids to socialise out of school hours, they don’t socialise in their town or village or wherever they live so much, and a lot of their socialising is in relation to school.’

Nevertheless, even after “controlling” for peer group, there were still worries. The parents of day pupils did not have such control on out of hours socialising, for example, and one parent still expressed concern about the academic culture:
‘... even in schools like this, I still find it sad that there is this phrase ‘keeners’ around, and you know if you are known to work hard and whatever, there still is this. It’s not the right thing, but you don’t know how much of it is ... I don’t know, I think it will always be around in the peer group and so on, but I find it quite... I’ve been quite surprised by some of the comments that are made by some pupils and I think: “but hang on a minute, that's why you're at a school like this”...’

There were other expressions of concern. However, remarkably, all expressions of concern in these interviews were accompanied by descriptions of the action taken in response: informing or taking it up with school staff, talking directly to other parents, or both. In all cases, parents expressed their willingness to act if they developed a concern. Recognition of this, with examples, was also forthcoming from staff at both schools. It was generally authentic, therefore, if not in the detail.

Efficient reproduction and the development of aspirational identity

Adults’ agency

So, to summarise, for these parents, choosing an independent school represents choosing an educational process which fosters and enables the choice, development and achievement of appropriate aspirations. These include university. The parents expect the school to be focused on this educational outcome, and its social and occupational corollaries, and work with their children at home to mirror the process.

From quite an early stage at secondary school, the young people are presented by staff with a series of possible generic futures achieved by people like them, using alumni and the broader social capital of their schools. Their own future achievement is related to a series of actions which they can effect now – doing well at GCSE, choosing particular A Levels, working hard, drafting a UCAS personal statement in a certain way, and so on. In this way, they “come to see the relationships between school, higher education and work” (Ball 2003, p84). And all the students in school, at the very latest by post-16, will be engaged in similar processes.

Discussion at home, without exception, reinforces the generic nature of these futures, presenting them with the outcomes for “people like us/you”. This is done through a domestic “drip-feed” process, whereby the mobilisation of social capital provides appropriate role models for their children: for example, through work experience or meeting other similar parents and their children, in their own social contexts. These contacts are reinforced by discussion and action: for example, accompanied visits to university. Where there are uncertainties or problems with the trajectory, social capital is drawn on to help find a way forward.

Going independent also represents for these parents a conscious choice of peer group for their children in school. This includes peer group for learning (because of its “high ability" nature), and peer group for socialising. Moreover,

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3 This is a south west regional idiomatic equivalent for such words as “swot"
these peer groups – whatever the occasional problem are likely to share similar ambitions and views of themselves. In selecting a peer group (and their parents), these parents are de-selecting others.

When concerns with the peer group or the other social contexts arise, these are followed by parent-driven intervention: directly in the context with their children, or with other parents, school staff, or all three.

Choosing independent school, in other words, is a way of maximising control over all the contexts in which children mature, develop and attain aspirations, and minimising the risk of their children developing inappropriate ones; it represents an efficient (though not necessarily trouble-free) management of social reproduction. Diagram 1 shows the various contexts of children’s lives over which parents seek the appropriate control:

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Diagram 1: sites for influencing/controlling the development of aspiration
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The “class work” of these parents represents the highest form of social reproduction; there may be hundreds of thousands like them in the UK, and possibly hundreds of thousands of others, who may, even after securing independent school places, be possibly less diligent or less effective. And further, there will be millions of other middle class parents engaged with state schools, in the upper strata of school systems if in urban areas. For them, it will be less straightforward to control all these contexts their children move in, but they will try hard using the stratagems of the parents interviewed, and through all the “extras” they will provide for their children from an early age (see, for example, Vincent and Ball 2006).

**Young People’s Agency**
But still, reproduction is a fragile and risky process, as we know from some of these interviewees’ comments and from Power et al (2003); it requires intervention from time to time. This is because, even with reproductive
processes in their highest form, successful reproduction will depend on what the young person eventually aspires to and achieves, and the steps they understand they need to take: their agency.

In this process of social reproduction, the young people experience similar representations of what is important, as they move from school to home and back: how they ought to be, what they should spend their time on, how they should behave, and what would be the appropriate aspirations for them, because of who and what they are. As young people begin to absorb these futures, they begin to see them as part of their “destiny” – with, according to the parents interviewed, varying degrees of enthusiasm and engagement.

But for “people like them”, these are the self-futures they absorb and largely work towards in one way or another; they become an integral part of their identities. Others are not routinely available to them; rebellion though possible, is harder with little experiential material to feed it. Young people develop notions of “who I am/who I am going to be”. They get to know that “other people of my age, background and attending schools like mine “go to uni”.

There is a similar process going on here to that involved in the development of epistemic identity. To every new social engagement, in a variety of “fields”, the young person brings developing notions of appropriate ways to behave and speak (cultural capital), notions of what people like us go on to do and achieve, and a variety of learning strategies and ways of thinking which have been acquired and developed through the iterative, interactive and reflexive processes of social contact, family life, and education. This self-perceived and owned educational, social and occupational trajectory may therefore be termed aspirational identity⁴. It is part of the structure of young people’s conscious and unconscious thought. It is an aspect of habitus, the “embodied disposition” by which young people frame and interpret new experiences and decide how to act in various fields.

For these young people, the control exercised over the various fields of social contact shown in Diagram 1 makes it more likely that they will emerge with an aspirational identity including university attendance and other appropriate social and occupational outcomes. In general, the more similar the assumptions, language, expectations and social behaviour across these fields, particularly where aspiration and appropriate pathways to it feature, the more likely the outcome. If the “games” in all these contexts are similar, they will be comforting and easy for the young people to have a feel for. They will mutually reinforce expectations and aspirations, a key component of “who I am/who I am going to be”. Through the continuing interactions between

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⁴ “Aspiration” is thus treated as a descriptor in this analysis. It has been used in a much more loaded manner than this, however, particularly since 1997. Blunkett, Labour’s first Secretary of State, referred to “poverty of aspiration” (2000); the first prospectus for the Government’s major urban education initiative (DfEE 1999), Excellence in Cities, made it absolutely clear that one of its main political purposes was to retain “aspirant parents” in the state system, to help counter the urban middle class flight from public services (Riddell 2003). “Aspirant”, always social constructed, means “wanting to better themselves and their children.”
experiences in the different contexts of young people’s lives, what is continually presented to them as appropriate in each, and the habitus by which they are framed and interpreted, aspiration is reinforced.

**The development of the aspirational identities of other young people**

However, Diagram 1 also represents the sites for the formation, reflection on, and development of, aspiration for children from all other social backgrounds. They too bring their own “embodied dispositions”, the sub-conscious/mental structure by which they frame and interpret new experiences, to each of these contexts. Outside independent school, where young people are largely “removed” from what may be fractious contexts, all other children will experience a greater diversity in the potential influences on the development of their aspirational identities.

The “game” may or may not be the same in all these contexts. For example, some students from working class backgrounds may be presented with the possibility of going to university as part of their potential educational trajectory. If the students are “first generation”, it is most unlikely they will be receiving the same sorts of message in all the other contexts in Diagram 1, no matter how interested and encouraging the family might be. For example, the students most probably do not attend schools with institutional habitus entirely focused on university attendance. And they will certainly have some peer groups who are not interested in higher education, and who do not really understand what it means.

Despite the efforts of Gifted and Talented programmes in some parts of the country, uncovered by this research, to develop “alternative high aspirational” peer groups, and those of some AimHigher projects to develop the role and contributions of parents, it is likely that these young people will have to have at least some extra features in their habitus and personal background to succeed. This might be the “resilience” identified by Lynn Raphael Reed and her colleagues (Raphael Reed *et al* 2007). Outside the “silver-spooned” context management for aspirational development of their peers in independent schools, *all* other young people will have further to go in order to “improve themselves”. For students from working class backgrounds, university attendance is not a “normal” aspiration and will represent a greater achievement.

For the “disengaged” students, right at the other end of the social and educational spectrum, none of their contexts is secure for the development of their aspirational identity. In fact, for them, all the contexts in Diagram 1 may be negative, rather than positive, for any trajectory. And hence, they may be mutually reinforcing in ways which are the exact mirror image of pupils at independent schools.

**Who are these disengaged young people?**

Staff running organisations providing for “disengaged” students were interviewed as part of this research with a view to determining the possible construction of alternative social capitals with positive roles, in each of the contexts in Diagram 1. This is still relevant and possible – though less
important than anticipated - and will be dealt with elsewhere (Riddell forthcoming); however, the “making up” of their aspirational identities is considered here and what can be put in place to aid it.

From the Government’s point of view, dealing with the “problems” of disengaged students has been a key policy priority for many years. More recently, the “ten year strategy for positive attitudes” (H.M. Treasury 2007), said that the aim is to ensure “young people’s participation in positive activities” (p13), but:

‘there remains a small but significant group of young people who are not benefiting from the opportunities that Government (sic) has created in the last decade and who need further support to build their resilience against risk.’ (page 12).

The Government’s intention is therefore to:

‘...invest significantly ... (in order) to expand the availability of year-round highly-personalised provision for the most disengaged young people, in order to sustain outcomes and progression.’ (page 64)

The aim for “socially-excluded young people” will be “to develop the skills and attributes they need to reconnect with mainstream services and succeed in life” (ibid p64).

In talking about young people who are NEET (not in employment, education or training), the Children’s Plan talks about how “low aspirations and low skills have become entrenched “in some areas of industrial decline” (DCFS 2007:114) and goes on to explain that:

‘As the UK economy continues to adjust, those young people that remain disengaged will become progressively more marginalised, as non-participation is a strong predictor of later unemployment, low incomes, teenage parenthood, depression and poor physical health.’ (also page 114)

And the Government’s concern has led to a new PSA (Public Service Agreement)⁵ to “increase the number of children and young people on the path to success” (ibid p126). The relevant indicators include:

- Increase(d) participation in positive activities;
- Reduce(d) ...proportion of young people frequently using illicit drugs, alcohol or volatile substances;
- Reduce(d) ... under-18 conception rate;
- Reduce(d) ... number of first-time entrants to the criminal justice system aged 10-17; and
- Reduce(d) ...number of 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training (NEET).

There will also be:

⁵ Public Service Agreement, between Central and Local Government, and usually on the basis of funding provided.
'a new goal that by 2020 all young people will be participating in positive activities to develop personal and social skills, to promote their well-being and to reduce the behaviour that puts young people at risk.' (p127)

And, in reporting “great progress in breaking down barriers for young people who are most at risk” (p127), the Children’s Plan also explains how high the stakes are:

‘There continues to be (sic - RR) young people who sometimes remain beyond the reach of services, who do poorly in learning, and who are alienated from their communities. We know that these young people often experience multiple, overlapping problems and risks:

- persistent truants are nearly ten times more likely to be NEET at 16 and four times more likely to be NEET at 18;
- young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties are four times more likely to use illicit drugs;
- three in five excluded young people report having offended; and
- 71 per cent of young women who are NEET for six months or more between 16-18 years of age are parents by 21.’ (same page)

So, “disengaged” means young people who are not accessing services, including schools, and indeed, they may either have been excluded from them or have a history of not going even though they are technically enrolled. They may be NEET, or at risk of it. They may be involved with the criminal justice system; drug, alcohol or substance abuse; be a teenage parent; or be at risk of these things. They may have no skills, and be “unable to succeed”. Indeed, their self-notions of educational, social and occupational trajectories, their aspirational identities, may be underdeveloped or likely to lead to any of these risks.

This seems a reasonable working definition and so from here on, this is what may be included in the term “disengaged young people”. One further note on this however: these young people, and particularly those described below, may have become disengaged through a variety of routes. This may be because of the circumstances of the home, whose nature made it impossible to encourage attendance at school; or just not attending through peer encouragement or lack of interest; or early employment in the alternative economy. It may be after developing a variety of “special needs” and “conditions”, for example, such as ADHD, which may have been assessed and met and/or “treated” – or not. And it may have been from a variety of settings including mainstream and special schools, a variety of “units”, special placements (eg at a college for key stage 4) or personalised programmes. They is not a uniform “group, therefore, and the young people present in a variety of ways, from mild need to the more difficult to engage, as the term might suggest. The people interviewed for this research were dealing with young people at the “heavier end” of this spectrum.

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As in the Treasury Document.
The attitudes and behaviours of “disengaged” young people
There is remarkable consistency in the descriptions of the young people given by the staff working in these various organisations, in different parts of the country, which suggests this might be found among a wider sample. Many reflect on an unwillingness or an incapacity to engage in varying degrees, as might be expected. It would be interesting to gather the young people’s views directly, although this is notoriously difficult with this group.

The first comments quoted below were made by “targeted” Personal Advisers (PAs) working for Connexions. K, the local Connexions chief executive explained that “targeted PA”s are workers who

“...would probably be working intensively with a group of no more than thirty young people at any one time, probably be meeting up with them anything from a couple of times a week to once every twelve weeks, making contact and seeing them probably in a café or a youth club, perhaps even in their own home initially. At the toughest end, the work goes on in the young person’s home to try and get them to come out and meet them somewhere else…”

K, Connexions Chief Executive

A, one the PAs, said the following about his school age “clients”:

‘The young people that I work with don’t seem to like structure; they work to a different time scale. They don’t, even in simple terms… they don’t like getting up at a particular time: they get up when they want to get up, not because they have to be up at seven thirty, eight thirty, nine thirty. They like to have some sort of control over decisions, so: “not that I have to go to science in five minutes, but I’ve chosen to go to go to art, science, whatever”…’

A, Connexions PA

L, another PA, described some of the attitudes she meets:

‘….they just seem to feel that they don’t have to do anything that they don’t want to do. And that extends into their education: “if I don’t want to go to my lesson, you can’t tell me to go”. Cos we used to have those conversations all the time, do you know what I mean? “It’s my choice” - they just don’t get it… (I’ll say) “It’s not your choice, because you know, it affects your future”… and they just don’t seem to grasp that somehow…. ’

‘….they think “I’ll just get a job”…they think (clicks fingers) they’ll just get a job, or they can get involved in other activities… because the NEET group that I’m … engaging with, they’ve all been, either … early college placement, young people who basically have been excluded from early college… or they’ve involved with the YOT… and basically they’re just not involved in education and training in any way.

Lorraine, Connexions PA

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7 The organisation set up in the UK to replace the former “universal” careers advice service with one intended to be more targeted towards students least likely to stay in education or training or gain employment.

8 Youth Offending Team
A similarly describes how some of the students he works become NEET, in his view, through a perceived lack of self-organisation or apathy:

‘...a lot of people end up being NEET because they haven’t realised... they’re leaving school and they are going to be in this situation when they leave. It’s very much a case of “I’ll sort something out later, I’m in school now; when I’m not in school I will do something”. But in reality it’s December of year 11, and you have to be applying for things November and December. If you leave it to June or July, everything’s full up, so I get a lot of young people that say “oh, in September I’ll get something”. Some genuinely think that they will in September, others are just fobbing you off and basically saying “I can’t be bothered”. They are the people that will stay NEET because they are voluntarily making themselves NEET…’

A, Connexions PA

In terms of the actual work with students, L describes how she set up a group within a school for intensive work to prevent African Caribbean young men becoming NEET (she is African Caribbean herself):

‘...so basically what I did, first of all I had a consultation with each of them. And I think initially there was about 12 and I ended up working with six ‘cos the other six decided that it wasn’t for them: they were quite happy not to be going to school and they didn’t want any support, so they made that decision not to actually attend the group.’

Lorraine, Connexions PA

And with the group that did turn up:

‘...even with me as a sort of enabler, and somebody that is actually putting, trying to reduce all the barriers to them learning, I would usually have to start each session with “Can we say good morning?”. Do you know what I mean…?’

And in a similar vein,

And she gave the additional example of how a supplementary school had been set up in her area targeting African Caribbean Year 10s and 11s, but as it took place on a Saturday, students said they “would not go” (and didn’t).

It is also worth noting that once in the NEET group post-16, entering specific provision (for example, Entry to Employment, E2E, or in some cases where there are low basic skills, pre-E2E) does not mean the young person has left NEET for good. K, the Connexions Chief Executive explained, in terms of Connexions’ clients, that there is “single phase NEET”, where

‘...it was their first experience, (they were) new to it, possibly (had) been in something already and dropped out or went straight into it after school...(Then there) is transient NEET: these were young people who had had a number of periods of NEET, gone into something temporary or permanent and dropped out. About 16% of them in that. And then there is the real tough group, consistent NEET - 35%. These were people that spent more time in NEET than not since sixteen: some concerned about their future, not being able to get back on course, usually with a range of other issues
exasperating their need - trouble with the police, drugs, housing, looked after children...’

He further elaborated: ‘...some of these transient ones and consistent ones are ones that can’t stick it.’ They are clearly at risk in the terms described in the last section and many will be involved with the organisations interviewed here.

**The aspirational identities of “disengaged students”**

These attitudes and behaviours – specifically the apparent indifference or unwillingness to engage with these organisations, and sometimes their schools – will have arisen and developed in the contexts shown in Diagram 1. For them too, habitus confronts and frames context, and is in turn modified by its interpretation of it. A key feature of these young people’s development may have involved the “messages” they may have engendered in others - about themselves and who and what they are - and their response to them through an iterative process. The contexts for the development of aspirational identity will be less constructive for these young people. There are a number of observations in this context worth setting out here, again, reflecting some consensus between the organisations where I have interviewed.

First, comments about home background were made by several of the staff. P, who is in charge of a voluntary sector project providing a range of football-related activities on estates in West Yorkshire (C---), said:

‘...the young people that we work with, aren’t, don’t sort of engage with mainstream traditional education brilliantly. And they often will come from families who, you know, in terms of sort of aspirations and role models... maybe they aren’t always there.’

P, West Yorkshire Project

And similarly, D, a local project manager of a national charity (F---) dealing with disaffected young people said:

‘...Often our young people tend to be from chaotic... have chaotic home lives, and we try and be a stable base for them, and work with them, and sort of support them ....in order that they can take the next step on to employment, education, further training, volunteering, that sort of side of things.’

D, National Charity

L, the PA quoted above, described the difficulties of eliciting a response at all from the parents of some of the young people she worked with. None had picked up the phone to find out what she was doing with their children, as she put it. She reported one young person as saying: ‘my mum sends me to school to get an education and it’s not her role to be contacting the school’.

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9 It should be noted, however, that this reflects the attitudes to school reported by Gillies (2007), and should not be taken *per se* to denote lack of interest at home. Children’s Service staff will often report care and interest from parents, but by the time the children are in their teens, the lack of a communicative relationship means parents perceive they have little influence. It is this set of professional perceptions that has fed the development of “parenting classes”, not always appropriately.
Non-communication between the responsible adults in the different contexts of young people’s lives certainly does not allow the sort of joint planning which oversees the lives of the children attending independent schools. A smooth transition between these contexts may not be possible for these young people, and it will be up to them to make sense of how all these different aspects of their lives fit together.

Because of the “hard end” of disaffection represented by the young people being described here, there may be fewer positive aspirations in the home, certainly in terms of “improving oneself”. This will be exacerbated where reportedly some of the young people concerned spend little time there, including at night. And when they are there, there will be far fewer opportunities to communicate and discuss aspirations compared to in the homes of children attending independent school. Hence the reported perceptions of the staff; the young people concerned may find few resources at home to support the development of aspiration.

In other cases, the young people concerned may be disengaged from school (just like the “lads” – Willis 1997, described below), because they cannot see its relevance, but not be so from much else. In another context, for example, A the Connexions PA, talking about AimHigher, says:

‘a lot of these families are impoverished and the young person is actually supporting the family network. It’s not as if they’re a separate entity from the family, they a very much a part of the nuclear group there, and they are bringing money in to the group. Now for some young people I’ve worked with that means running drugs for a parent … if the young person goes off to college or university and is removed physically from that situation, they are not going to bring in a sizable chunk of funding which is currently coming in to the home group.

Obviously, these sorts of young people are not likely to become NEET in the full sense described by K, although involvement in the alternative economy may make them appear so. This is a quick route to adulthood; it does show it is difficult to generalise.

So, communication between the adults in different contexts, and therefore the smooth transition between them for the young people, may be a problem for some of these students, making potentially for more fractured identities. At school, the iterative communications which scaffold the development of aspirational identity may also be more negative for many of them.

“Disengagement”, whatever their academic capacity, will make it less likely for these young people to help deliver the performance targets of their schools. These students will not see themselves as, or be told that they are, key pupils for their schools; the key message taken by them, within the regulation of a performativity culture (see, for example, Ball 2008, p43/4), is that they are failures. Where they have been disruptive, they will have again received negative feedback about themselves. They know what “successful” students are like, and know that they are not among them. Their educational trajectories may appear to them correctional rather than aspirational, and the
implication of such a message is that they are unlikely to be successful in any normative sense. Their aspirational identities will have to be different from the ones recognised, paraded and rewarded in school.

Some of these young people will seek out similar as a peer group, therefore; part of the articulation and reinforcement of the identity of the group may be through their common narratives and behaviours (this has long been known, see for example Sewell 1997). An example of such found by this research was a group of Africa Caribbean students who described to L the process whereby their disaffection began in Year 10 when they had no Maths teacher. It made them feel, according to them, that the teachers did not care about them and made them not want to “make an effort” in school.

So at least some disaffected peers, like the “lads” (Willis *ibidem*), described below, will seek “people like us” as their peer group. Some will have sought each other out or come across each other as non-attenders, wanting to have someone to hang around with when “bunking off”. Others again, especially if they are the sort of “loners” who do not emerge from their homes often, as described by K, will find themselves in the company of people like them, if they finally emerge and begin to access services in the statutory or voluntary sector.

So a most important issue in these contexts is that they are not mixing with a group of peers with normative, positive aspirational identities, articulated freely. And it is likely that their attitudes and behaviour will carry over into their contacts with each other and into the community – hence the contact with the criminal justice system and “criminality” referred to by P and others. These continual iterative contacts in the community and peer group will scaffold particular sorts of aspirational identity.

Wider community experiences will also vary. Even the most socially disadvantaged community will not be uniformly so, despite the exoticisation by some media. Even after the closure of a major employer in an area, some families will still have aspirations. They will seek, find and take up employment and expect the same from their children. I suspect that it is these families on local authority estates who *do* enter the education market, even if just to climb a few places up the stratified school system. The issue is whether positive aspirations and ways of living are now a matter of community norms and reinforcement, through classic notions of social capital, or not. The “respect” agenda would tend to think, at the extreme, it is the latter, which is also Putnam’s classic view (2000); it seems likely from experience to be more nuanced than that and may vary street by street, though this theme will not be developed here. “Anti-social behaviour”, in which some of these young people *will* be involved, will therefore bring community responses to inform their self-perceived social trajectories as “bad lads and lasses”; and outraged local media coverage will exacerbate this.

None of these young people will be able to escape the denotations in the various written and broadcast media of success in our consumer society – they will be all round them, particularly in urban areas, and will be repeated in
pirated DVD after DVD. The norms of the good life, involving money, decent cars, particular sorts of clothing, and respect from peers and others because you have all these things, will all be inaccessible to them by the usual normative routes, and they will have been told this repeatedly throughout their lives.

People like them do not have these things; their self-perceived social and occupational trajectories, their aspiration identities, will not and cannot include them – at least by a certain age (see below) – and so they will begin to include other things, many with destructive consequences for themselves and others. They will embrace some of the risks specified by the Government. This is one interpretation at least of gun and knife crime. Involvement in “criminality” (P), or specifically the drugs trade, can provide access to “bling” at an early age: desirable rewards, with apparently little effort, and without all the difficulties and personal challenges they may face otherwise. In some communities, the signs of this will be very apparent and young people from quite an early age will be aware of peers and slightly older people who are involved.

As D, the project manager at F, said, echoing A’s comments on page 17:

‘where there’s a lot of dealing going on, a lot of that sort of stuff, they see people... it’s a quick way to get money by getting involved in criminality…’

Developing aspirations: cultures of resistance

There are thus huge historical, structural, social, economic and pedagogical realities behind these reported behaviours and attitudes of disengaged young people, and those accessing these services.

What is striking about all these accounts of young people is the counter-normative nature of their attitudes and behaviours, their resistance to school and sometimes other services intended to “support” them. They are of a similar type to those described by Phil Willis in his account of the “lads” (Willis 1977). The “lads” were a group of teenage young men expecting, after leaving their midlands comprehensive school, to join their fathers in manual jobs putting a premium on physical strength. They lived a culture of fighting, sexual precociousness, resisting school expectations and “having a ‘laff’”, often at the expense of other pupils (for example, the “ear’oles”, who had more “elevated” aspirational identities and saw a connection with doing well at school).

This lived culture, according to Willis, was a mirror image of that on the factory floor or manual work generally. Although the narratives these young men were receiving from school about themselves would be largely negative, as Willis explains, like the disengaged young people today, this culture, and the expectation of what will come after school, were positive and gave rise to positive aspirational identities, reinforced by their peer group and fathers (leaving aside the role of their families and gender expectations in their socialisation). These young men did envisage trajectories which included, if they stuck school out, getting a job, and a series of further steps, including girlfriends, marriage and “settling down”.
Thus, the attitudes and behaviours of the disengaged students being discussed in this paper can also be understood as part of a resistance culture, in contexts where they are constantly receiving the message that they are failures.

But one of the great differences is that Willis’ lads did have a self-recognised trajectory through manual work, even within school resistance. These sorts of manual jobs in manufacturing largely disappeared over the next twenty years, however; and so that clear occupational trajectory also disappeared for men in many communities, with consequences written about elsewhere (eg Riddell 2003).

The re-emergence of unskilled or routine jobs over the past ten years or so may provide a potential new trajectory of the sort described by Willis. Lynn Raphael Reed and her colleagues found that easily available work in the Bristol South parliamentary constituency made the pursuit of further education or training a less attractive option for some students (Raphael Reed et al 2007), but the decline of manufacturing was still a key feature of the economic landscape there. More about economic restructuring in the next section.

A reestablishment of a “lads’” and now “lasses’” trajectory may be a possibility, depending on the effects of the recession which has commenced at the time of writing. But in any case, this is not the trajectory expressed by the “disengaged” students. Indeed, they do not have simply expressed aspirational identities at all, because it is difficult for them to do so; their aspirational identities, in educational, social and occupational terms, are problematic.

Resistance is thus about self-respect and sanity.

The problematic development of alternative aspirational identities

The problematic nature of the development of these young people’s aspirational identities arises from the fact that they have not internally grasped any link between what may happen in school and further education, training, or employment, at least in the sense they have to act on it. For the young people considered here, this may well be due to failure messages received about themselves in school, which make such links difficult to conceive, or be due to difficulties elsewhere, which many of them have. And this is then compounded by some of the attitudes and behaviours described above, which may have developed independently or in relation to how they found school life, and are barriers to enabling the development of aspirational identity.

This results in certain expressions about their futures by these young people, but I am sure these are not restricted to them. One is the later and later abandonment of the so-called “fantasy stage”, in careers officerese, fuelled no doubt by the strong media images of the good life, according to some of the interviewees. A explains this well:
‘... in careers terms you go through different stages, and one of those is the sort of fantasy stage. And a lot of (these) young people unfortunately later and later are still in their fantasy stage... They’re convinced they are going to be the professional footballer... (even by) fourteen, fifteen, sixteen (with some of the young people I deal with). If they play for a very minor club in B---, they feel that because they belong to a club they could be a professional footballer... The problem is two fold: there’s the ambitions, the fantastical ambitions of young people because they haven’t really had it explained to them properly, what is available to them, and I don’t think they’ve had enough opportunities to explore what they’re capable of.

A, Connexions PA

So this is another example of disengagement from “real” or “realistic” options. L’s view of lack of aspiration and not making a connection between the here and now and what happen was explained thus:

‘...I’m (now) finding that I’m looking at more and more around attitude and low attendance, and basically, like I say, apathy: just, “I’ve got no vision about the future”, and where they’re going, and why they need to do this school work... but there seems to be more... it seems to have more of an impact when it comes to the BME kids... because there just seems to be a multitude of issues that are affecting them.’

P, the manager of the West Yorkshire project also lamented the continuing lack of ambition:

‘...I wouldn’t like to generalise, but what I would say is you can definitely see that they are on ... they are in this … cycle of, you know ... “this where we live, this is where our parents lived”. Parents’ aspirations, well certainly a percentage of them, aren’t there. It’s like ... you know ... “same as me”.

This is a wider phenomenon than for the disengaged; a similar lack of aspiration was also reported in an LSC-commissioned research report comparing the aspirations of young people in Bristol and Birmingham (SHM 2004). Those of young people in Bristol were reported much lower than those of their peers. It is quite all right to want to be like your parents of course and, even without qualifications, this may lead to employment of the sort described in the last section, however short-lived it may be and however great the need for “serial jobseeking”. It is not secure, but it may be adequate. Not everyone needs to be “aspirant” in the sense used by Tony Blair (DfEE 1999).

Much more seriously, however, being like one’s parents in socially deprived areas may lead to serial employment, but it is as likely to lead to unemployment or serial unemployment. The current Government has spent a great deal of time worrying about so-called “workless neighbourhoods”: mostly created by the economic restructuring of the 1970s and 1980s and, most importantly, which have not been touched by the recovery which commenced in the 1990s (Riddell 2003).

The situation remains serious. In 2004, in the 10% most deprived wards, where there are many disengaged students and which are variously estimated to have 8 million inhabitants, 33% of the heads of household were
unemployed and 29% economically inactive (ODPM 2004). And even in 2006, a Government report was saying:

‘Changes in the nature and organisation of work have led to increased uncertainty, fluidity and insecurity in labour markets, which are characterised by a greater degree of segmentation and inequality, both socially and spatially. High levels of unemployment and inactivity have become entrenched amongst certain groups and in certain areas, and there has been an increasing focus on the mismatch between high levels of worklessness in deprived neighbourhoods and employment growth in areas peripheral to major urban centres.’

(Sanderson, 2006)

Unemployment is bad for your health, as we know (Sanderson *ibidem*), just as are the future risks of disengagement. Raising aspiration (in the Tony Blair sense now) will not by itself change the situation in workless neighbourhoods. It may enable some young people to escape its consequences, however, the risks they may encounter otherwise, and the effects they may have on these neighbourhoods. Many disengaged young people come from these estates.

**So what can help the development of the aspirational identities of disengaged students: staff perspectives**

There are ways of working with disengaged students with reported success. Again, there was remarkable consensus about what appears to work, although obviously this is not a systematic survey of practice.

For example, Targeted PAs relate stories whereby their own groups, or referral to various (mainly voluntary sector) agencies, have enabled the “removal of barriers” to learning and how some successes (eg on an NVQ Level 1 course at a local college) can begin the development of aspirational identity where before there was little.

The process of working with disengaged students *begins* with talking to them sympathetically about who they are, and what they want to do and be. Necessarily, this sometimes takes extended time and patience, and convincing the young person they are being listened to. For the young person, it is about having a “sense of knowing that there’s somebody out there to talk to, that somebody cares” (L). And it is essential that this must provide the basis of a sound “relationship with both the young people and the wider community – if you get their trust and build that relationship, then I think it opens a lot of doors” (P).

But this involvement is about “moving them on”, identifying what could be around for them and what they would need to do to achieve it. And as P says,

‘...when I was growing up, it was very similar... It took someone to sort of say, “Well, why can’t you do that? There is no reason why you can’t do it”. And I think that is still lacking for a lot of young people. And then, you know, it’s just that, sometimes it’s the simple life. They think, “Oh, there is something there that I can do. I’m good at that”, but they need a little push.’
His feeling was that some of the young people he worked with had not received that, and this was echoed by D, the project manager at F---:

‘in order to help young people move on you’ve got to be able to sort of say ‘what do you want? You know you can do x’. Especially when they see our staff who come from that background, so “I was like you but I’ve got a job, you know, I’m doing this and that”. That really helps.’

But this is not straightforward:

’It might take (a) long time with an outreach worker who will really be able to begin to sort of dig down…’

and requires positive attitudes:

‘because I guess generally we sort of believe at heart that most young people don’t really want to be in the situations they’re in, be excluded’.

And again, there was consensus that, for many of these young people (but not all of them), being able to talk properly to someone who is recognisably like them is also important, irrespective of their qualifications. See for example D’s first comment on this page. And he elaborated further on this point:

‘…what helps at F--- (the national charity- RR) as well is that two of my staff are very much ex-clients, they’re from that background, you know; they’ve had difficult upbringings themselves, they make it sort of more acceptable.’

These staff are not people who are implicated in schools or services which have not managed to give a positive, solid message to these young people, and which they have resisted in previous incarnations:

‘all the staff are sort of local people and a lot of them are from the communities we work in, which is again, you know: “This is on the map, this opportunity is really within your grasp and, you know, have a go at it”’.

P, C--- Project

P gives a further example of both how this works and a success story:

‘… we recruited some staff a couple of years ago; one of the staff we took on was a young 16/17 year old lad who was… his mum was so shocked that we had sort of taken him on (laughter) and given him this opportunity etc. Again he’s probably from one of our rougher estates if you like, but age, I suppose, to us is not a big deal. You know he’s a young lad, very sort of keen and vibrant and he’s great; he’s already in great touch with some of the young people that we work with. Again, his age is so close to some of the young people, that you can see why he’s a great role model for them… you have to find a way of talking to young people… so it’s trying to find something in common…’

P, C--- Project

But helping young people “move on”, does mean enabling the next (often short) steps to be taken by the young people: “action plans, goal setting, and (enabling them to) start their path, start their first steps down the path of
personal development” as D, the project manager at F--- said. And the best location for such work, according to G, the head of policy at a prestigious national charity that funds many projects and other work for disaffected young people, is therefore “close to, but not on, local authority estates”.

And because of the nature of the diverse needs of disaffected young people, and their various paths to date, the organisations exercising patience in their “digging down” as D expresses it above, have to have some flexibility in how and when they work with young people. K, the Connexions chief executive, reflecting on referrals, explains why:

‘…(some young people) can get in (to a provision), but they don’t seem to be able to continue, and therefore it’s how can you help them to stick in there and go forward… which is sometimes getting the provider to be more flexible and certainly getting the young person to recognise that, if you start not attending and being late, the end point of this is they won’t put up with you.’

F, the national charity, keeps on taking young people back, for example, no matter how many times they do not turn up, until they make progress, and then, later, they encourage them to move on again when they need to.

Finally, changes in life circumstances – irrespective of the services they are accessing - can lead to changes in how some young people see themselves and how they act. P from the C--- project gave such an example where his organisation was able to respond flexibly:

‘…And he’s got right stuck in over the last sort of 9 months, in terms of working with our youth workers with a group of about 6 or 7 14, 15, and 16 year olds. This lad’s now got a young child of his own and he starts with us on a sort of 9 month work placement full time on Monday. And that’s not been sort of engineered, or from any type of plan, but there are…I suppose it’s with those types of things that we are flexible enough in our organisation to respond to, if you like. I’m sure that will work brilliantly and you know, he’s a great role model for young people on the estate he’s from.’

Another example was PS. His interview was one of the most moving of the project; he had had a former history of drug abuse and had spent time in prison. One day, he said, he just saw himself differently:

PS It wasn’t a very big thing, not really, one of my best friends died of an overdose….I just …

Interviewer It changed the way you think…?

PS Yeah, I’d just failed in my life. I was really in…..I had a feeling I was brought up fine but I was just…it wasn’t me, do you know what I mean? I was, you know, I was putting on an act.

He began to work as a volunteer in the C--- project. At the time of the interview he had recently begun to work on a more permanent basis and had just passed his first football referee’s examinations: the first time he had passed anything. He was asked about his self-confidence returning:
‘... that’s right, yes it did, yeah, and I really liked the jobs that I did (at the C--- project – RR), do you know what I mean? And I wanted to make a difference for the kids and stuff…

**How should provision for disengaged students be made?**

The charities where I interviewed were quite different from each other. Two were national: one making well-known and long standing provision, mainly of an “outdoor” character, and the other a well-known national brand both making its own provision and funding some very specific programmes. The local one had been set up by an individual from the area concerned, who therefore knew it well, because he thought there was nothing for local young people and wanted to do something about it. Connexions is a national statutory service, albeit now funded via LAs. Although it does work extensively with young people, including by running bespoke groups, for example who are potentially at risk of becoming NEET, it makes no general provision itself.

None of the charities makes long term provision (such as that made, for example, by a PRU or special school) and all intend what they do to be transitional to another stage of young people’s lives. Young people’s involvement is not always full time, but it may be over a considerable period, including with gaps!

The young people come to the charities (according to the interviewees) from a variety of places: Local Authorities (placement officers dealing with exclusions and/or special educational needs, behaviour support staff, education welfare officers, psychologists, social services), schools direct, the police, and occasionally via the local Learning and Skills Councils (LSC). Referral from none of these agencies guarantees full funding, except for one of the national charities where it was sometimes a condition, but even then not all the costs were covered. So all the organisations spend time fund-raising: trying to attract funds from prominent individuals, other charities, local authorities, LSCs, companies and ordinary members of the public. For smaller organisations, this did mean some living from hand to mouth, but none talked about major funding problems. All, however, talked about changes in provision they had been making, or would have liked to have made, because of changing priorities of statutory bodies or other funders, locally and nationally, or of new arrangements. They are often not party to these discussions and have to be strong enough to maintain tried and tested “products” – often the niche provision they make and have become excellent at – or adapt what they provide to funders’ changed priorities.

In contrast to young people at the other end of the spectrum of need/"ability", the gifted and talented, there has been no national strategy or systematic investment in such organisations. Even where government funding has set up major local projects in socially disadvantaged areas, such as the New Deal for Communities, there appears to have been little investment in these sorts of organisations, with funding intended in this and other regeneration schemes, to complement statutory funding. There are many NDC projects nationally to help disadvantaged students attain higher at school, according to one of the
national evaluators, also interviewed, some of them of very high quality. Many of them do make complementary provision (for example, family literacy and parental involvement). Overall, though, the result is difficult to detect (CRESR 2005). In addition, some of these projects existed before NDC and expanded with its funding.

Charities, making very specific, skilled provision like that described here, have been in the disengaged field for many years, dealing with diverse needs. The pattern of provision locally, from town and city to region, will depend upon decisions taken by charities to set up a local project or not. There is only one C--- Project, for example, and it happens to be in West Yorkshire. Often overwhelmed LA Placement Officers, particularly in urban areas, struggling to find something to meet a young person’s needs, will as a consequence refer to what is there, not always appropriately in the charities’ view:

‘… LEAs were dumping young people they didn’t know what to do with on F---, and saying ‘you deal with them, we’ve not got a school place for them, there you go’…we would have young people coming to us, and great, we could do great work with them, but we didn’t have anywhere to move them to…’

D, F--- Project Manager

And this takes no account of the other referral sources referred to above, or indeed the young people who may turn up who have been out of the system for some time.

Children’s Trusts are now responsible for commissioning provision – a role known well by LA senior officers – and need to ensure that they have access themselves, or in conjunction with surrounding trusts, to provision which meets all the needs in their area, and not just those who have gone through a “CAF”\(^\text{10}\). In addition, trusts are also now expected to commission a proportion of their services through the “third sector” (HM Treasury 2007). It would seem likely that similar work between areas will be undertaken sometimes by the voluntary sector (as Barnardo’s has historically provided for children in the public care in some regions) and sometimes by LA funded and managed provision, possibly in different ways.

There would appear to be no reason (except for government requirements) why some existing provision made by charities should not be in the statutory sector, and this could provide better long term funding guarantees. But there would certainly be some difficulties which would have to be resolved.

First, these organisations make very “niche” and specialised provision, often of a transitional nature. If funded, they may have to take young people with wider or different needs they feel they could not meet, or were inappropriate, rather than seeking clients from a wider field as an LA’s demands change. Whichever way a local provision is to be made, it will have long term core costs it has to meet irrespective of the number of clients it has on its books. If it remains a charity, it could fundraise for at least some of these, but if the

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\(^{10}\) Common Assessment Framework
provision is primarily LA funded, there would need to be some guaranteed basis to avoid this fundraising.

Second, the remarkable consensus among these organisations about recruiting “people like us” to deal with this group of young people, is often executed in an informal way, typical of the charity world. They often begin as volunteers, and are then taken on, paid and supported in getting qualified. They then become the longer term role models. Although this is similar to recruitment historically, for example, to LA youth services, on an informal sessional basis, it is not like the usual recruitment practice of large statutory organisations.

Third, there would have to be clear agreements about referrals, just as there are for LA specialised units, because of the concerns mentioned above. Clearly this is not insuperable.

Fourth, there is a strong view in these organisations that (to the young people), they are a new and different provision, working with the young people in different ways. This could be possible with an LA sign outside, but also important is that they have staff and volunteers who are not implicated in unhappinesses earlier in young people’s educational trajectories, and the organisations are not stigmatised. P expressed this well:

‘Certainly I think the reason, one of the reasons, that we are successful is that we are not seen as a “doing to” organisation. We aren’t statutory services or an education department. We are not the council, if you like – a bit of neutral - so sometimes it’s easier for us to get into places that statutory services can’t.’

P, West Yorkshire

Fifth, the flexibility of the programmes offered by these organisations, considered vital to meet the needs of disengaged young people, is often considered much easier in the voluntary sector than the statutory. K, the Connexions Chief Executive, mentioned this problem with some post-16 “providers” (see page 24; he had some colleges and work-based learning providers in mind), and D explained how in his organisation, he was able to have young people back time after time, even when they hadn’t turned up. This would be difficult to do with a fixed cost, fixed term placement.

Children’s trusts must make their own arrangements. With well-planned provision, what could be in place locally would be a range of provision through 100% statutory, through third sector organisations commissioned to do specific work with agreed types of need, through to wholly independent organisations along the current lines, with agreement referral by referral.

So some organisations in the statutory sector currently could be in the charitable sector, or vice versa. What is important is that there is flexibility in the spectrum of provision and that it is possible for young people to move on to something concrete after a short or medium term placement.
Above all, it is essential that the expertise in the current charitable organisations is maintained, and that a more systematic approach is taken everywhere so these young people’s needs are met. This should be borne in mind when “piloting new forms of alternative provision” (DCSF, page 14), spending on a “new programme to re-engage 16-year-olds who are not currently engaged in learning” (p16), and implementing the green paper on young offenders (p18).

References


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This document was added to the Education-line database on 17 October 2008