

## **The perspectives of ‘disengaged’ students in the 14–19 phase on motivations and barriers to learning within the contexts of institutions and classrooms**

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In addressing educational disengagement, government policy in England focuses primarily on raising the age of educational participation, promoting vocationalism and directing resources at the population of young people not engaged in any education, employment or training (NEETs). However, ‘disengagement’ is a more fluid and dynamic concept than policy allows for and is visible within a wide range of students, even those deemed to be engaged by their presence in education and educational settings. This paper presents students’ accounts of their educational experiences which suggest that the context of the classroom, student–teacher relationships, peer relationships and pedagogical methods used in classrooms are salient factors in understanding engagement.

**Keywords:** student engagement; educational disengagement; education reforms; student–teacher relationships; classroom contexts

### **Introduction**

The notion of educational disengagement is an area of considerable focus in academic research and policy formation, (DCSF 2005; QCDA 2009; DBIS 2011; DfE 2012). Much of this tends to be on how to recognise disengagement across broader educational settings; understanding the myriad of underlying causes and consequences and the potentially negative impact at both the individual and societal levels. Disengagement from learning is often associated with low attainment, underachievement, a reduced sense of belonging to schools or colleges, disruption in classrooms, poor relationships between teachers and students, truancy, long-term unemployment and disadvantage (for a selective review see: Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver 2007; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004; Gibbs and Poskitt 2010; Lumby 2012; Montalvo, Mansfield, and Miller 2007; Niemiec and Ryan 2009; Ross 2009; Stephenson 2007; Willms 2003).

The following paper presents data collected as part of the Centre Research Study (here after referred to as the CReSt study) which engaged a range of educational stakeholders on the 14–19 reforms and broader perspectives on education in England. This paper reflects the perspectives of 15 focus groups of students whom participating educational institutions identified as disengaged. Based on data from these perspectives, this paper problematises the idea of disengagement and thus concurs with other research (Callanan et al. 2009;

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EdComs 2007; Gibbs and Poskitt 2010; Ross 2009) in arguing that any definition of disengagement is much more complex and multifaceted than commonly employed and therefore has little use as an homogenous descriptor of young people's states or positions within education. The paper argues that the notion of being 'disengaged' is often thought of, and treated as, an overly definite description of a young persons' educational value-base and behaviour. Rather, we align with the argument that (dis)engagement is not a static indicator, nor a fixed state of being. The student participants in this study talked about factors which both inhibit and encourage their engagement with learning, particularly relationships with teachers and peers; the quality of teaching and their view of the differential value of practical/vocational subjects compared with academic subjects. Students' levels of engagement fluctuate depending on many such factors. The idea of disengagement is further problematised through students' positive aspirations for future success and achievement in juxtaposition with the various ways in classrooms that they appear to be disengaged.

The paper also examines a complex policy arena in which both recent and present governments have responded to educational disengagement, but argues that policy in this area continues to be overly focused on addressing the extreme versions of disengagement, such as those young people who are not in education, training or employment, rather than addressing the continuum of 'engagement/disengagement' in the local contexts and institutions and classrooms. As such, the paper reflects the perspectives of young people considered to be to some degree 'disengaged' by their institutions and who remain under-represented in research which consults them about educational reform and policy formation (Elwood 2012).

### **Disengagement: definitions and understandings**

The concept of disengagement is generally defined within the research literature so much so that agreement is less obvious and any working definitions offered tend to overlap and show a complexity that demands more thorough investigation (Gibbs and Poskitt 2010). Therefore, disengagement tends to be defined within the structures and confines of particular studies. For example, disengagement has been described as: switching-off or drifting (McGrath 2009); a lack of attentiveness (Rock 2005); students' lack of participation in the classroom and/or school (Sandford, Armour, and Warmington 2006); or truancy, misbehaviour and exclusion (Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver, 2007; Kinder 2002; Sandford et al. 2006). Attainment levels and/or the accumulation of grades are also used as indicators of engagement or disengagement amongst those in educational settings (Balfanz, Herzog, and Mac Iver, 2007; Mac Donald & Marsh, 2004; Sandford et al. 2006).

A wealth of research has concentrated on defining disengagement through focusing on teacher–student relationships and the concept of relatedness (Fredricks et al. 2004; Goode now 1993; Hughes and Kwok 2006; Libbey 2004; Lumby 2012; Martin and Dowson 2009; Montalvo et al. 2007; Niemiec and Ryan 2009; Osterman 2000; Walker and Greene 2009; Willms 2003). For example, Furrer and Skinner (2003, 149) have defined relatedness with respect to school climate, teacher relationships, feelings of belonging and acceptance and inter-personal support. They have argued that all such factors directly impact on engagement as well as levels of attainment, success, expectation and general interest in school. Research has also considered that, for some, educational disengagement can be exacerbated by factors outside of school, (Broadhurst, Paton, and May-Chahal 2005; Daniels et al. 2003; Sutherland and Purdy 2006; Visser, Daniels, and MacNab 2005) and in more extreme circumstances has been linked with anti-social behaviour or criminality (Stephenson 2007).

Thus, it is becoming accepted that a working definition of engagement/disengagement should accommodate a variety of perspectives. Ross (2009), for example, has argued that in defining engagement, one may have to settle on a complex, multidimensional concept and Gibbs and Poskitt (2010, 10) in a similar vein to Fredricks et al. (2004) have also argued that any definition needs to be holistic, taking account of the 'complex interplay between students' emotional states, their behavioural engagement, and the way they learn academically'. Furthermore, not only should the definition of disengagement be multidimensional but students labelled as such should not be considered an homogenous group (EdComs 2007; Ross 2009). To illustrate this, Ross (2009) goes on to argue that *the disengaged* could be broken into four different groups: 'engaged' young people who are highly engaged and aspirational; young people who are disengaged from school but not education and remain aspirational; those disengaged from school but not further education and still aspirational; and those who are more fully disengaged, with much lower aspirations than the rest. Such a four-part model of looking at, and representing, engagement allows for a more dynamic notion of the concept to emerge and for students themselves to move between the four levels depending on context and educational settings and subjects.

### **The policy context**

At the time of data collection within the CReSt study in 2010, the Labour government's policy aspirations articulated within the Raising Expectations Green Paper (DFES 2007) and the 14–19 Education and Skills White Paper (DCSF 2005) set out clear proposals on student engagement. These proposals included the identification of, and intervention with, those students struggling with engagement to ensure acquiring basic functional skills, providing opportunities to enjoy new styles of learning, opportunities to learn in different settings and more opportunities for applied and practical learning. Emphasis was placed on young people being able to pursue qualifications that were most appropriate for their needs and aspirations. The subsequent 14–19 reform programme emerging from policy documents was designed therefore, to respond to these policy aspirations by enhancing the curriculum and increasing the number of qualification pathways available to students. In doing so, the curriculum was intended to be more innovative, flexible, enjoyable, motivating and relevant to learner needs (QCDA 2009). Hayward and Williams (2011, 176) described this policy approach, as one that attempted to engage young people in positive activity in order to raise aspiration.

Since 2010, with the succession of a coalition government, Higham and Yeomans (2011, 220) suggested that government policy has, to some extent, shifted the focus of reforms towards a 16–19 phase with a lack of interest in the concept of a 14–19 phase as it was previously considered and a subsequent 'piecemeal approach to 14–19 education and training'. Current government policy outlined in the 'Building Engagement, Building Futures' document (DBIS 2011) makes distinct links between disengagement and educational participation. The report argued that students, who do not attain, were less likely to participate in education and training, thus leading to disadvantage and therefore strategic intervention during early and teenage years is vital. The programme for engagement further identified key areas of focus that were considered essential to improving engagement which included the raising of the participation age (RPA), providing apprenticeships, coherent vocational education within 16–19 provision, financial resources through a 16–19 bursaries fund and the introduction of the 'youth contract' (DfE 2011, 24).

RPA of schooling is one of the most explicit policy approaches designed to address disengagement from education. A significant part of the rationale behind RPA is the targeting

of those young people who are at risk of not being engaged in any education, employment or training opportunities after compulsory education – often referred to as not engaged in any education, employment or training (NEET). The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills estimated that there were 1.6 million young people between the ages of 16–24 who were classified as NEET. As a consequence, they were more likely, compared to their peers, to be long-term unemployed, be less skilled, earn less, suffer from poor health, and have fewer opportunities for social mobility (DBIS 2011). Furthermore, when outlining the vision for education in England, policy-makers appeared concerned that in a competitive global economy, complicated by a recession, these young people may face long periods of unemployment and fail to acquire those skills that will enable them to contribute to stimulating economic growth (DBIS 2011). Commentators, however, have pointed out that the NEET population tends to fluctuate and that many young people remain in this situation for only short periods of time, or that there is a churn effect (Wolf 2011) resulting in messy learning/training trajectories (Atkins, Flint, and Oldfiels 2010). Hayward, Wilde and Williams (2008) described the recorded NEET population as no more than an annual snapshot of young people's destinations. Furthermore, Higham and Yeomans (2011) pointed out that such figures disguised the distinctions between participation rates at 16, 17 and 18 years respectively. For example, in 2009, only 46% of 18-year-olds were in full-time education and training. Since then, the educational participation rates of 16- and 17-year-olds have increased, as more young people opt to stay on in education (Higham and Yeomans 2011, 221). This may say something distinctly positive about recent and present policy impact, but Wolf (2011) argued that while there are higher rates of young people recorded as remaining in education, post 16, the motivation may be more about avoiding a hostile or declining youth labour market in times of recession. Similarly, Hayward and Williams (2011, 178) have argued that there is no longer 'a sustainable progression towards employment' from education for many young people. The current policy context is a confirmed commitment to raising the participation age in education to 18 by 2015 yet Hodgson and Spours (2011, 267) warned that despite this, RPA may become a 'symbolic measure', in that other measures previously introduced to encourage young people to remain engaged and participate are being withdrawn or refocused within current government initiatives.

Hayward and Williams (2011) also highlighted 'the turn to vocationalism'; here successive educational initiatives, as a consequence of performing badly against European neighbours, were introduced in a concerted effort to reassess 14–19 vocational approaches. The introduction of new qualifications such as GNVQs and Diplomas was designed to act as 'motivational devices for those assumed to be turned off by academic learning' (Hayward and Williams 2011, 182). Ross et al. (2011), however, in a recent study, found no evidence to support the claim that offering young people vocational options helped improve their levels of engagement. Notably, the young people identified by Ross et al. (2011) as disengaged were more likely to select vocational courses as a strategic decision; seeing such courses as rewarding, enjoyable and of use for future study or employment. Wolf (2011, 44), however, warned that in reality, many young people were taking vocational subjects of dubious quality that are not valued in the labour market thus offering a poor return on the effort expended.

## Methodology

The CReSt study was set up as a longitudinal study of multiple cases, which involved the participation of 52 educational institutions across England. This paper is based on data collected from 18 of the 52 centres between 2009 and 2010. Three-day case studies were

carried out in each centre and a range of stakeholders were interviewed including: senior educational staff, governors, teachers, students from years 11 and 13 as well as students deemed by their institutions to be disengaged who were sampled from years 10 to 13 in each centre. All students involved in this study were consulted on a range of themes including their understanding of and experience of educational reform; their opportunities to learn, subject choice and qualification routes; and their experiences of learning and about their aspirations and achievement. Under the theme of experiences of learning, there were a number of questions which were designed to draw out perspectives relating to engagement, including questions around: motivation, barriers to learning and the environment in which they learn and relate to others, including peers and teachers. The CReSt study was designed to explore the views and experiences of students from across a range of achievement levels and as such centres were asked to sample students whom they considered to be struggling with engagement in education in various ways. To help identify such students, a working definition emerging from the literature and debated between teacher participants and researchers was finally agreed upon and used within sampling protocols:

'disengaged' includes those excluded permanently from school, those who have left school at leaving age, those still in school who cause disruption, experience a sense failure or feel that the curriculum is pointless as well as those who despite succeeding in school lack interest in deep learning. Thus, disengagement would refer to lack of involvement in academic, social or extra-curricular activity or poor conduct in these contexts. (Baird et al. 2011, 143)

Alongside Year-11 and Year-13 student focus groups, there were 15 'disengaged' focus groups each containing 6–8 students across 18 centres. This data was recorded, transcribed and then imported into a qualitative data analysis package (NVivo 8). A coding framework, aligned to the structures of research instruments, was devised. It was constructed deductively by existing literature, theory and policy as well as inductively through the process of research-producing thematic areas that were explored further. Twenty-three primary-level codes were initially used to categorise the data-set. One of these codes, 'engagement', was used to capture data on engagement, disengagement, student motivation and enjoyment. This code was then treated to a second level of interrogation with data categorised and analysed under a number of sub-themes: young people's educational backgrounds; enjoyment; assessment; quality of teaching; relationships; labelling; educational values; what motivates learning; and barriers to learning and aspirations. The data from the 'disengaged' focus groups was then interrogated separately from the rest of the student data and the sub-themes discussed above are explored in the paper below.

## **Barriers to learning**

### ***Relationships with teachers***

When asked about those factors that might be barriers to learning, students frequently mentioned poor or negative relationships with teachers. Levels of engagement and motivation were often dependent on whether students liked their teachers. Often, the degree to which students engaged in a lesson depended on '*how down to earth the teachers are*'. Elaborating in focus groups, students suggested that at times they felt that teachers disrespected them and treated them '*like kids*' or that they often '*look down at you*'. Participants' views tended to reflect an imbalance of power whereby they suggested that teachers could be '*cheeky*' or say things to them that they were not happy with, yet, they felt unable to respond to what they

described as a sense of powerlessness (Lumby 2011) in such situations and at not being able to be *'cheeky back'*. In detail, students talked about being *'shouted at'* or even *'screamed at'*. According to Pomeroy (1999), behavioural patterns shown by teachers in schools such as antagonism, shouting, sarcasm and telling students to *'shut up'* were common, which in turn had the effect of communicating a message that students were not valued or liked as individuals, thus affecting motivation and behaviour. Students in this study suggested that poor relationships with teachers tended to have a disrupting effect on lessons and, as a consequence, on learning opportunities:

say that teacher's done something to you, then you won't do the work in their lesson. You just don't want to be in their lesson. (Year 11 focus group)

Students also argued that poor relationships with teachers increased the chances of them being sanctioned often leading to exclusion from the classroom; a strategy widely used to deal with disruptive behaviours or tensions between teachers and learners. Being excluded further compounded the effects of disrupting learning opportunities, making reintegration into lessons and catching up on missed work more difficult.

### **Feeling labelled and a sense of belonging**

A picture of *'disengaged'* students, as a separate or distinct group from other mainstream students, tended to emerge. A dichotomy was created between themselves and other students – the *'good students'* who were described as *'nerds'*, *'teachers' favourites'* or *'pets'*, *'stuck up ones'* or the *'library people'*. Students argued that teachers could be preferential towards the *'smart ones'*, who tended to be sanctioned less, received more attention in the classroom and generally enjoyed sustained positive relationships with teachers:

It's like in my health and social [class], we've only got 12 people in our class and there's two different groups, and if the whole class will be sitting talking we're the ones getting shouted at and getting told to work; but we might have just done the same amount of work as the other group, but they won't even get looked at or anything. (Year-11 focus group)

Perhaps to compensate for this sense of *'otherness'* in relation to *'good students'*, participants described themselves as drawing support and a sense of belonging from their peers who also struggled with engagement. Thus, participants frequently described themselves as *'trouble makers'*, and *'rebels'* and were complicit in assigning and reinforcing these labels to themselves and others. Furthermore, for some students, being identified as *'disengaged'* tended to be seen as a badge of honour. When asked how they might identify themselves, some suggested that they were the students *'not scared to tell all the bad things'* yet *'not expected to reach their intellectual ability'*. In summary, students described themselves as those who still *'try hard'* but *'like to have fun at the same time'*.

### **Relationships with peers**

Another factor that emerged as a potential barrier to learning was relationships with peers in classrooms. Young people described how other students, often their friends, could be distracting or disruptive around them, thus interrupting lessons and opportunities to learn:

I'm trying to pass my GCSE's but I can't when all these boys are messing around being completely stupid and immature idiots and lobbing each other off chairs and stuff and punching each other. It's like why don't you just stay quiet for an hour and do your work and then mess around out of school. (Year-11 focus group)

Others reflected on incidents that showed tensions in classrooms between themselves and those groups of students they had previously described as the 'good students':

So say some little nerd goes up to you or whatever, right? If they say to you, "why are you messing around", when you are just having a little laugh, then that gets me more provoked to turn round and tell them to do one, and then you start kicking off with them. That's when the teachers like, look at the best ones who have got like records of perfect, got like a stars. (Year-12 focus groups)

Not all of the discussions around peer relationships in the classroom focused on behaviour and disruptions. Students described feeling left out of lessons because some of their peers could 'take over' the learning. Participants argued that it was difficult to try to compete with the 'know it alls' and instead they felt 'put down'. Others described not feeling confident to speak or talk out in large classes. Moreover, students argued that a good class with learning opportunities could depend on what mood both the teacher and the students were in.

### ***The quality of teaching***

The quality of teaching, range of pedagogical approaches used and ways of teaching the subject were all raised as factors that impacted on students' opportunities to learn. One example, of teachers relying on text books, illustrated students' frustrations at the lack of creativity that they suggested that some teachers show in teaching their subjects:

S1: Well, in maths you copy from a textbook every lesson.

S2: I think that's stupid doing that, you're copying.

S1: You copy from the same textbook every lesson. I didn't learn anything last term.

S2: I don't learn anything from mine; I want extra maths, that's what I want. (Year 10 focus group)

Likewise, having to copy 'off the board' too often or lessons lacking diversity in teaching methodologies or approaches were also considered 'off-putting' and not conducive to good learning experiences:

If you just sit there copying stuff from the board and that, you're going to be bored you're not really going to get anything out of it. But if it's fun and you're doing work, then you'll get more out of it. (Year-11 focus group)

Participants also talked about becoming disruptive, restless or fidgety in classes where teachers tended to be overly explanatory, leaving little time for student input during a lesson. Moreover, lessons tended to be 'boring' with some participants accusing teachers of '*not putting in enough enthusiasm*'. Students in such circumstances suggested that they commonly reverted to bantering with other students, walking around or leaving classrooms and

texting friends during lessons. Students across a range of contexts highlighted that they often struggled to understand the teacher's intentions and were not clear about lesson objectives and/or outcomes:

She [the teacher] thinks she's explained it to you but you don't have a clue what's going on'.  
(Year-13 focus group)

Such views reflect other research that has examined the relationship between the quality of teaching and disengagement. Callanan et al. (2009), for example, highlighted how changing teaching styles to include more interactive learning, using games, drama and even ICT, could have a positive impact on disengagement. Bryson and Hand (2007), based on a study of students in a HE context, argued that students were more likely to engage when there was support from teachers, and when teachers were themselves engaged with the subject they were teaching and focused on the teaching process. Bielby et al. (2011) suggested that learners are more likely to engage when they are encouraged to take ownership of learning; when teachers use flexible approaches to teaching; when teachers can demonstrate strong subject knowledge and expertise; class sizes must not be too big; teachers must be more alert when pupils need extra help; and lessons should be delivered in an appealing and where possible take into account real-life contexts.

## **Motivation for learning**

### ***Relationships with teachers***

Having positive relationships with teachers emerged as one factor that could be a significant motivator for learning. Such relationships could make lessons much more engaging, positive, fun and entertaining. Participants suggested that some teachers had empathy to be more understanding and as a consequence were able to calm students down, were more approachable and tended to take more time to listen to students' perspectives. Students suggested that they were more willing to engage in learning when they felt that the relationship between them and the teacher was warm, caring, respectful and positive:

S1: Someone [teacher] who has a laugh with you, but you still do your work, but they let you talk and sit with your friends as well. When you're with them it makes you want to do your work.

S2: I like that teacher because she talks to you ... but then she'll also tells you about the work. I learn more in [subject] than I've ever learned because the teacher treats you nicely. (Year-11 focus group)

Bielby et al. (2011) emphasised that a positive relationship with a trusted adult can make a significant difference in terms of maintaining young people's engagement. This perspective tended to be supported through the data whereby students suggested that they responded much more positively to teachers who complimented them or were enthusiastic about their work. Students across all focus groups argued that those teachers who they got on best with were the ones who were less 'stressed' or 'uptight'. They tended to respond best to those teachers who could take a joke, who were more flexible and more positive in the classroom:



When you've got a positive role model, a teacher who is not strict, doesn't tell you what to do, but can have a laugh with you but helps you learn in a way that you want to learn instead of pushing you to the abilities you can't learn at. So you've got to be positive yourself and you've got to have a positive teacher as well, 'cause if you haven't got a positive teacher you're going to get nowhere. (Year-11 student from a special school setting)

### **Active participation and being practical**

A common response, with regard to what motivated students to learn, was having opportunities to participate in lessons or 'to get involved'. Students talked about enjoying opportunities to engage in whole class and group discussions, large and small group work, working in pairs or being able to move around the classroom:

S1: Doing different stuff. Like doing the same stuff all the time doesn't help you at all. Like if you do like sit there in the classroom and then doing like group work and stuff and like walking around [...].

S2: When you get involved, like in science we do this thing where you get a picture on the computer screen and, you're in a group of four or five and you've got to remember little bits that they try and draw on your bit of paper and it's like just stuff like that. (Year-10 focus group)

Furthermore, students suggested that they enjoyed learning through engagement in hands-on, practical or vocational activity. They often made a distinction between being practical and being academic. One student explained that they 'loved' their Sport BTEC course because they did a lot of practical work and got to play sports as opposed to 'being stuck in the classroom', *listening to the teacher jabber on and on*'. Collectively, they talked of being more engaged in lessons or courses that did not mean having to spend time in the traditional classroom and when such activities could be of use to them after school:

S1: Construction things really, like plumbing and bricklaying. You learn more in them than you do more or less in the lessons really because it's something you can do when you go from here.

S2: Well that's what I want to do with the plumbing part. I'm doing the bricklaying while I'm [here] it's just something better than sitting in the classroom. (Year-11 focus group)

However, not all students argued that active methodologies motivated them or helped them learn best. Others suggested that some students preferred being able to work quietly or independently and having classes with smaller numbers of other students provided them with quieter spaces with opportunity for more personal attention from, and interaction with, teachers. Students suggested that where these opportunities occurred, they 'got loads done', and they felt more comfortable getting involved in whole class discussion or debates.

### **Educational values and aspirations**

Despite being identified as disengaged through the remit of the CReSt study, the vast majority of participants still thought of education as valuable and important; an essential currency required for further or higher education, getting jobs and as a means of improving their quality of life. For many students, being at school and college helped them develop as people and showed them as being as aspirational as any of their peers (see also Rose and Baird 2013, this issue). Again, listening to young people talk about educational values and their aspirations brings into question whether students can be accurately described as entirely disengaged. Students appeared to retain particularly functional visions of school and its purpose.

When asked about the value of attending school/college, common responses were about 'learning', 'getting exams' or 'qualifications', about socialising or 'being with friends' and as a preparation, a 'stepping stone', before going on to further/higher education or getting a job.

Additionally, students were asked if they felt that their school/college was helping them develop as people. Most students replied positively to such questions and argued that, though their various schooling experiences they had, to various degrees, gained confidence, grown up and matured:

Coming here [college] has made me realise how hard it is to get a job and everything, so you just put your head down so you can have a good chance'. (Year-12 focus group)

At first I didn't realise it was going to be that important but like now since I've got a bit older I perceive it will actually help me later on. (Student in a secure setting)

Students also talked about coming to a realisation that their education was important; that they needed qualifications to get jobs; and that they had reached a point where they realised that their attitude to life needed to change. Students who had left school to attend other colleges or sixth forms described making such a change and adjusting to their new educational environments as developmental:

I think it's the whole environment, the college and sixth form... you're in a place where there's different types of things going at the same time, so you've got to adapt to everything. And that helps you as a person to learn how to work with different things, with different people and to adjust to different lifestyles. (Year-13 focus group)

By contrast, participants also considered that to a certain degree, they were being *sheltered* or *'bottle-fed'* by their institutions. Some argued that they felt isolated and 'enclosed' in the intuitions they attended. They suggested that while they were still being pushed (academically), they did not have the opportunity of being pushed socially, 'in a world way' with schooling environments perhaps making young people remain narrow-minded and ignorant of the world around them. While generally students remained aspirational and hopeful for the future, not all young people were confident of their post education destination:

I want to do well in life, really. Like I said, I've got a lot of regret from school that I wasn't happy with, and I just want to try and turn it around really and make something of my life, do something a bit better. But then again I always get confused as to what I want to do. I don't want to go ahead and jump straight into something and then be like, 'Oh my God, this isn't what I want to do for the rest of my life at all'. And like be stuck with it. (Year-12 focus group)

Furthermore, the realities of the current economic climate were not lost on students and many suggested that such circumstances may hinder their transition from education to employment, thus creating more uncertainties at yet another transitional milestone:

S1: There's no jobs so you're worrying about getting a job all the time, well I am.

S2: What it will be like in the future, if you're going to be a bum, if you're going to be rich, it's a big worry like, you know? (Year-13 focus group)

## Discussion and reflections

The data considered in this paper highlights the importance of the classroom context in terms of understanding student engagement. One of the more salient themes to emerge is

'relatedness' and relationships between teachers and pupils and between peers. Student-teacher relationships are clearly very important and a determining factor influencing the extent to which students engage or not, and can be one of the most fundamental aspects of a student's educational experience (Becker and Luthar 2002; Furrer and Skinner 2003; Hughes and Kwok 2006; Pianta et al. 2001; Pomeroy 1999; Taylor and Robinson 2009). Montalvo et al. (2007, 144) argued that there was 'little doubt that teachers influence student motivation and achievement'. Furthermore, Lumby (2011) highlighted that relatedness is a frequent theme in student narratives about disengagement, with many students citing negative relationships with teachers as a contributing factor of their disengagement. Data from his study suggested that not all teachers value all students in the same way, and students who feel devalued in some circumstances tended also to be in conflict with other peers whom they see as more able or socially integrated into school life than themselves. Crucially, students described witnessing preferential treatment of more able students who appeared to occupy a more favourable position in the classroom hierarchy. Pomeroy (1999) suggested that such hierarchies of power within classrooms often leave certain groups of students feeling positioned at the bottom of a hierarchical structure (whether this is the case or not) with associated frustrations at what they see as an inability to change this structure. Pomeroy's hierarchies of power in the classroom reflect students' understandings of the realities of relatedness, with teachers holding the most powerful positions, disengaged students holding the lowest positions and in between are students, thought of as better behaved and/or more able. Teachers' relationships with students further up this hierarchy are seen as more constructive and positive; a major consequence of which is the differential treatment of young people. Hughes and Kwok (2006) further argue that this awareness of differential treatment extends outwards affecting the way in which students relate to one another in the classroom. Furrer and Skinner (2003:149) suggested that for students, teachers are 'key social partners' and when students feel unimportant or ignored by teachers, they tend to report higher levels of boredom, disengagement, unhappiness and even expressed anger. The differential dynamics of teacher-student relationships may play some part in reinforcing how some young people feel labelled by both teachers and peers and generating conflict in classrooms. Therefore, it is possible that young people's actions in the classroom may be a projection of frustration at not being able to challenge teachers' own behaviours. Thus, any reaction to such frustration may well be interpreted as disengagement in this context, but it may be more a characteristic or product of the dysfunctional social relationships and interactions between teacher and student.

Arguably, there is an element of disconnect between the research literature on disengagement and policy formation in this area. As considered earlier, policy in post-16 provision at present seems to be overly focused on RPA, responding to the NEET population and vocationalism. However, a strong theme emerging from this study and other similar research (Hughes and Kwok 2006; Lumby 2011) indicated that relatedness and connected themes have major significant bearings on student engagement. Thus, it is not obvious how policy is addressing such themes. Present government policy argues that early intervention, at all stages of education and particularly at 16, is vital in order to prevent those young people who are most at risk becoming NEET or disengaged (DfE 2012). While this early intervention strategy does include references to giving teachers more powers to deal with challenging behaviours and truancy, there are no references in this strategy with regard to improving relationships between pupils and teachers. While we acknowledge that the data considered in this paper gives only the perspectives of students and neglects those of teachers', the critical point remains; how teachers treat pupils in classrooms has an impact on the extent to which they engage. Thus, educational policy and practice in this area should

consider relatedness; building capacity amongst teachers to minimise differential treatment and to respond more positively and proactively in classrooms. This may go some way to reduce levels of disengagement and allow students an active role in minimising those situations and interactions that are more likely to strain student–teacher relationships.

It is clear based on the data presented here that for some students, policy approaches such as enhancing the curriculum, developing teaching and learning methodologies and the offer of additional qualifications pathways have the potential to impact on their level of engagement. Offering young people a much more innovative and flexible curriculum may be a prudent and preventative strategy to encourage young people to stay in school or college. Qualification routes and improved opportunities for applied and practical learning and the current government commitments to vocational education and training (DBIS 2011) may go some way to improving provision and access to quality and rigour for these young people. However, as Ross et al. (2011) and Wolf (2011) have argued, vocational options must offer young people genuine and high quality pathways that provide training and associated qualifications that are valued in society. Pring et al. (2009, 5) have argued that previous actions to meet the challenges of those young people who leave school unprepared have amounted to a series of qualification reforms and a ‘plethora of vocational options’, including apprenticeships that appear more as a ‘circular motion rather than progress.’ Fuller and Unwin (2011) likewise intimate that current arrangements which underpin vocational and educational training [VET] were not coherent or consistent, and argued that present new visions for VET effectively increase segmentation and show the re-emergence of dichotomies of ‘technical education’ and ‘practical learning’ (Fuller and Unwin 2011, 192) which create distinct educational siloes and destinations for students. They further argued that a new approach to VET should combine ‘work-based’ and ‘classroom-based’ tuition and experience, with planned transition from the age of 14. Thus, students should be able to accrue vocational knowledge and occupational expertise, whilst being underpinned with general education; allowing students the flexibility and confidence to ‘change direction’ and alleviate the concerns that ‘vocational education might restrict young people’s horizons at too early an age’ (Fuller and Unwin, 2011, 202).

The focus of this paper was to represent the perspectives of students identified as disengaged in the schools and colleges within the research setting. What has emerged from the data is the problematic nature of the classification ‘disengaged’ as well as the complexity of the student experience within such defined groups. The data explored here corroborates other research, in arguing that the definition of engagement/disengagement is complicated and multilayered and that if it remains ill-defined, this may complicate how practitioners identify young people within such categories and similarly how they respond to and support them. From exploring issues of educational experience with the participants, it is clear that disengagement is neither a static state nor a fixed condition – young people move in and out of levels of engagement and can simultaneously be both engaged and experience disengagement at similar times and stages of their education. It is heartening that despite struggling with engagement, the young people who took part in this research remained aspirational valued their education and were in the broadest sense, still very much engaged.

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