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Alternative educational provision in an area of deprivation in London

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The attainment in national examinations and progress of pupils to the age of 16 in London is the highest in England. Nevertheless, there is still a significant number of 16- to 19-year-olds who are not in employment, education, or training (NEET). Those who are the most vulnerable to becoming NEET are the young people who have disengaged from mainstream education. This article draws on a comprehensive examination of the effectiveness of an alternative education provision (AEP) for pupils who were disengaged from mainstream schools in one London local authority. Through the application of Bronfenbrenner's ecosystems theory, the study explored the impact of different ecosystems on young people's disengagement. The findings in evaluation studies of other AEPs and the findings in this study indicate that AEPs – and the curriculum, pedagogy, and pastoral care that they offer – can, and do, make a considerable difference to the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children, as well as offering insights for mainstream education. Thus, the study contributes to the current debate on the organization and structure of the 14–19 education system in England under raising the participation age (RPA) to 18, the new legislation that came into force this academic year.

Keywords: alternative education provision (AEP); not in education, employment, and/or training (NEET); 14–19 education; special educational needs (SEN); raising the participation age (RPA)

Introduction

In 2010 the Directorate for Education of the European Union published *Taking on the Completion Challenge* (Lyche, 2010), which reviewed international research examining dropout from upper secondary education and training in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. The paper intended to provide possible solutions to policymakers faced with the low participation in upper secondary education. It stated that one out of five citizens of OECD countries had not completed upper secondary education and training by the age of 34. In the age group 18–24, 11.1 per cent (12.7 per cent of men and 9.5 per cent of women) were early leavers from education and training with, at most, a lower secondary education (Eurostat, 2015). In England, the latest figures for the second quarter in 2015 showed that 15.3 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds were not in education, employment, and/or training (NEET) (DfE, 2015). There is a concern among policymakers in England, as in other OECD countries, that early leavers from school may be at greater risk of economic and social exclusion.

Over the last three decades, successive UK governments have introduced a range of educational policies and curriculum reforms within the English education system in an attempt to narrow the achievement gap between pupils from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds, and to improve upward social mobility. A key strategy has been the promotion of greater numbers of

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young people staying on in education and training, until the age of 18, and gaining access to higher education. A recent manifestation of this strategy has been the raising the participation age (RPA) legislation, which since September 2015 requires all young people to be engaged in some form of education or training up to the age of 18. However, at 7.3 per cent (DfE, 2015), there are still significant numbers of 16- to 19-year-olds in England who are NEET as well as 14- to 16-year-olds who have been permanently excluded from mainstream secondary education (6 pupils per 10,000; ibid.), and are thus at risk of becoming NEET owing to their special educational needs (SEN), disengagement from formal education, behavioural and, sometimes, learning difficulties.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) found that 'providers of education and training for young people aged 16, 17 and 18 are not doing enough to prepare them sufficiently for employment and further or higher education at 18 and on to a future of sustained employment' (2014: 26). Inspectors stated that around a million 16- to 24-year-olds were classed as NEETs and the number of people whose whereabouts were unknown was rising (ibid.: 24). The education inspectorate's annual report on further education and skills also identified that too many learners were not progressing from their prior attainment to a higher level of study to meet educational and career aspirations.

A range of sources (e.g. Lumby and Foskett, 2005; Copps and Keen, 2009; Wolf, 2011) claims that the qualifications, and the habits and experiences that young people gain and develop in the years that follow compulsory schooling, influence their future earnings and employment, and their physical and mental health; so, ensuring a motivating curriculum and effective post-16 transitions are both vital for this age group.

As a result of continuing problems of disengagement and disaffection among 14- to 19-year-olds and a significant number of NEETs in England, there is growing interest both in the nature of the 14–19 curriculum and in how alternative curricular programmes in and out of school can help in re-engaging such young people in order to enable them to progress into post-16 education, employment, or training.

Literature review

The research on which this article is based contributes to the current debate about the nature and organization of the 14–19 curriculum under RPA through an examination of the effectiveness of an alternative education provision (AEP) in supporting young people's progress, achievement, and re-engagement with mainstream education.

Ideas about a unified 14–19 education system that aims to meet the needs of all young people have for some time been actively discussed in academic research (e.g. Phillips and Pound, 2003; Hodgson and Spours, 2008; Pring *et al.*, 2009). However, despite numerous reforms in this area, government policies have failed to implement a 14–19 framework that encompasses both general and vocational learning (Higham and Yeomans, 2011), or which constitutes the universal upper secondary education that the RPA reform promises (Hodgson and Spours, 2012). Wolf's *Review of Vocational Education* (2011), for example, was carried out quite separately from the reforms that had already been put in place for general education. As a result, despite considerable research evidence that a mixed general and applied/vocational curriculum for 14- to 16-year-olds had been successful in engaging many learners who were at risk of disengagement (e.g. Golden *et al.*, 2005; O'Donnell *et al.*, 2006), there was an assumption in the Department for Education's 2010 White Paper that the vast majority of young people would pursue General Certificates of Secondary Education (GCSEs) until the age of 16 and then specialize in either general or vocational education from that point.

Apart from the curriculum, an investigation into educational disengagement also requires consideration of the multitude of factors that underpins it. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979, 1994) identified a complex set of factors that influence a child or young person's development. In order to tackle educational disengagement, all of these factors need to be taken into account and an adequate intervention put in place. In relation to school and AEP this means adoption of an approach that emphasizes the creation of 'a safe, supportive and caring school environment, inclusiveness and a student-centred philosophy that focuses on the whole student (personal, social and academic)' (Bron and McPartland, 1994, cited in Hallam and Rogers, 2008: 12–13).

Hallam and Rogers (2008) reviewed national and international policies and practices relating to behaviour management and transition between primary and secondary schools (e.g. the Behaviour Improvement Programme; the Primary Behaviour and Attendance Pilot; behaviour and education support teams; lead behaviour professionals). From the research findings, Hallam and Rogers recognized that the causes of poor behaviour and attendance at school were complex and multifaceted, 'operating at the level of society, subgroups within it, the family, the school, peer groups and the individual' (Reid, 1999, and Edward and Malcolm, 2002, cited in Hallam and Rogers, 2008: 25). Evaluation studies on AEPs showed that these types of educational settings were often more supportive, nurturing, and challenging for pupils experiencing social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD) than practices adopted in some mainstream schools (e.g. Macnab *et al.*, 2008; Lovering *et al.*, 2006; McNeil and Smith, 2004; Kendall *et al.*, 2003; Reid, 2002; Reid, 2003; Morris, 1996). These studies described provisions adopted by AEPs in dealing with students disengaged from education. Although the types of provision in these studies were different, common characteristics were found: the provision was small in size; it involved closer interaction between teachers and students; it had a supportive environment; the curriculum was relevant to students; and it was flexible, with an emphasis on the personal, social, and academic development of young people.

Over two decades ago, the Elton Report (1989) recognized the role that AEPs could play in providing education and meeting student needs outside mainstream school. It also emphasized the importance of leadership, whole-school behaviour policies, classroom management skills, and challenging – but appropriate and differentiated – curriculum delivery. Soan (2013: 13) quoted Bronfenbrenner (1970: 163), who 'felt it was vital for a national approach to "joined-up", collaborative working … neither in our communities nor in the nation as a whole, is there a single agency that is charged with the responsibility of assessing or improving the situation of the child in his total environment'.

The study

The study was set in what we shall call the 'London Borough of East End' in which the number of young people who are NEET has remained unchanged since the early 2000s, at around 10 per cent (DfE, 2015). The borough continues to have the highest proportion of young people in London claiming Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA). In May 2014, 6.5 per cent of young people aged 18–24 (1,175 individuals) in the borough were claiming JSA, compared to 3.6 per cent in London as a whole, and above the 5.5 per cent recorded for the second highest borough (Nomis/ONS, 2014).

This article explores the findings from an evaluation of an AEP for year 11 students (15- to 16-year-olds) who had been excluded or were at risk of exclusion from local mainstream secondary schools because of their SEBD and, sometimes, their learning difficulties. The aim of the programme was to provide an alternative approach to teaching, mentoring, and assisting students

in preparation for their GCSE examinations and BTEC (Business and Technology Education Council) assessments, and eventually to facilitate students' reintegration and progression into mainstream education, training, and/or employment. In order to provide these opportunities, the student–teacher ratios were reduced; classes comprised 12 to 15 students and the teacher was supported in each lesson by a learning support assistant (LSA). In addition to this, liaison with a multitude of external agencies within the borough, as well as working closely with parents or carers, was strongly encouraged.

The aim of the research was to examine the different factors that had had an impact on the educational disengagement of young people who attended the AEP and to assess the effectiveness of the programme in meeting students' needs (i.e. their re-engagement in education, retention, academic achievement, reintegration, and progression into further education, training, and/or employment). The study was designed not only to improve the programme and to guide future planning and implementation of AEPs, but also to support mainstream schools in adopting more inclusive and preventative practices for their most vulnerable pupils.

Research approach

A case study approach was used to examine the development of the programme over a period of seven years with 'the programme' itself as the case. Yin (2003) has suggested that case study design can be used to document and analyse implementation processes, the outcomes of the programme, and its overall effectiveness. Based on his typology of case study designs (ibid.: 44), this study adopted an *embedded, single-case design* in which more than one 'unit of analysis' was incorporated. Thus, a case study of the programme also used sub-units of individual students, which were then presented as 'student individual case studies'.

A range of research methods was used in the investigation of micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystems for 'the sub-unit' of students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979) identified a variety of environmental systems that affect human behaviour. It posits the idea of the developing person at the centre of, and entrenched in, several environmental systems, ranging from microsystems (i.e. immediate settings such as the family, peers, and school) to macro- and exosystems, which are more remote contexts such as the educational system, social class, and broader culture. Finally, the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) represents a temporal dimension that emphasizes that changes in the child (e.g. puberty, adolescence as a transitory period), or in any of the ecological contexts of development (e.g. stressful events at home, school) can also affect the direction that the development is likely to take.

The study examined the AEP's processes and outcomes and explored students' and staff's views on its effectiveness, its strengths, and its weaknesses. The individual student case studies investigated in more depth the reasons for students' disengagement and their progression, and allowed inferences to be drawn on the impact of the AEP, and specific features of it, on individual students.

In order to preserve participants' anonymity, fictional names were used for the borough, the programme, and all research participants. Particular care was taken to ensure that ethical issues that might arise from research of this nature with vulnerable students were fully considered. Confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the avoidance of personal risks needed to be addressed when investigation into individual students' case studies was conducted. Also, since this method of enquiry could have encountered sensitive personal circumstances, both parental and student consent were gained.

Phases of research and data analysis

The starting point in this investigation was the analysis of the programme records and documentation. Next, students' files and progress reviews were examined in order to compare school reports on admission to college, diagnostic tests, and the end-of-year exam results. This provided information on students' progression in terms of their behaviour, attainment, and attendance while on the programme.

The second stage of research was exploratory and consisted of group discussions with staff and semi-structured interviews with the programme management. This phase aimed to examine how the programme was implemented, with the view to improving its processes.

The themes that emerged in the examination of documentary evidence and group discussions were further explored through the students' questionnaire analysis and semi-structured interviews with ten students from cohorts in different academic years. The explanatory phase measured programme outcomes (taken from the college database) on students' retention, attendance, academic achievement, and progression to further education, training, and employment, and compared some of these outcomes to national averages. Student questionnaires were used to examine student views on the programme's strengths and weaknesses, and to 'track' student progression after the completion of the programme.

Findings

The findings describe the impact of each ecological system examined in the study on the development of young people. An examination of the effectiveness of the programme on students' achievement and progression post-16 showed that the achievement was satisfactory and often higher when compared to national averages, although the retention was still lower than in mainstream schools, indicating this as a main weakness of the programme. Thus, the main area of improvement for the programme would be an investigation into reasons for 'dropouts' and a follow-up study on students who did not complete the programme. The investigation into students' progression indicated that, overall, 80 per cent of the cohort who completed the programme successfully enrolled on further education courses post-16. However, around 10 per cent of these young people dropped out from their courses by January in the same academic year, mainly because of their behaviour or attendance.

An analysis of young people's meso- and chronosystems

Students' views on reasons for their referral to the programme

For the great majority of young people college was 'a fresh start' and they were aware of the factors that may have caused their disengagement with mainstream education. In discussing the reasons for their referral to the programme, the young people described their circumstances. It was evident that there were other factors, alongside the curriculum, pedagogy, and discipline in school, that had had an impact on their attitudes to schooling, including their lives at home or in the immediate environment such as issues concerning peers and culture.

The majority of young people who were interviewed were eligible for free school meals, which indicated that their parents were not employed or were in low-waged employment. These family circumstances might have negatively impacted on their aspirations and expectations, thus affecting their motivation and engagement in education. Furthermore, many of the parents of these students did not possess any qualifications, so may not have been able to fully support their children's education or provide guidance about future options. The opportunities in terms

of qualifications, courses, and progression pathways open to young people have been, and are, constantly changing in England (Higham and Yeomans, 2011) – which makes guidance for young people's decision-making complex for even the most informed and educated of parents.

An analysis of the educational setting as a microsystem

College versus school perceptions

The young people were eager to speak about the differences between school and college. Most young people expressed the view that school treated them like children and teachers did not give them a chance to voice their opinions when it came to experiencing problems with their learning. College, on the other hand, provided an adult environment that treated students as adults and where teaching staff on the programme listened to and valued their views – a finding that echoes earlier studies (e.g. Coffield *et al.*, 2008). They also saw school as formal and compulsory, whereas college was informal and voluntary – despite the fact that their attendance and punctuality were closely monitored in college too.

As a result, all the young people who were interviewed (except one) preferred attending college to school. One of the main reasons given for this preference was the relationships with teachers. They expressed views that teachers in college were more supportive, willing to understand and listen to students' problems, and more helpful when it came to managing work in classes:

> I didn't choose to come to college but I enjoyed college and got on with most students on the programme, not really getting in trouble much. Maybe because they [teachers] treated us and spoke to us like we was adults.
>
> (John)

The young people described their experiences at school as not enjoyable and having a negative impact on their relationship with their parents, whereas their engagement in college had positively impacted on these relationships at home.

The staff agreed that a college environment, which was more relaxed than mainstream schools, and the treatment of young people as adults were both critical to the success of the programme and students' progress. Similarly, both programme heads viewed college as having a positive impact on the progress of young people owing to its expertise in vocational subjects and the facilities it offered to its students. They indicated that the adult environment of college was more suitable for young people who experience SEBD. The programme staff encouraged them to act like adults because they treated them like adults. According to one of the students, William: 'Teachers in college staff dealt better with behaviour than teachers in school. They weren't that strict so I got into less trouble. They talk to you like you're an adult, they don't look down on you.'

Pastoral care

Students identified as the main strengths of the programme the support they received from staff, being treated like an adult, and the fact that the qualifications they gained on the programme helped them to enrol on post-16 courses. Most of the students suggested that their attendance, behaviour, and attitude towards education had improved as a result of attending the programme:

> I think that teachers helped me a lot with my behaviour. In school I just got shouted at, then I used to argue back and got in trouble. I didn't get on as well with all teachers but they were all good

> teachers. They helped me to enrol on the course I wanted to do … Teachers on the programme always had time for students. I could talk to them and trust them.
>
> (Richard)

The majority of the students noted that they achieved higher grades in their examinations than they had been predicted in school. Some students mentioned that getting certificates for good attendance, behaviour, and work, as well as the communication and acknowledgement of good outcomes they achieved on the programme, helped in motivating them:

> My parents were much happier with me when I started to go to college. The teachers called them when I did good work and I got certificates for good behaviour, work, and attendance. This made my parents very happy. I was happy too, I don't think that would have happened in school.
>
> (Sylvie)

The programme heads identified that staff characteristics and the attitudes and approaches they employed towards the young people, in and outside of the classroom, played an important role in 'reaching' them. The staff responses showed that these professionals shared similar views about, and interest in, the young people and their personal circumstances. Their common goal was to tackle any barriers to success and a commitment to help these young people to achieve their full potential.

Discipline and pedagogy

The young people stated that being in smaller classes, and having a teacher and an LSA in each class, meant they were getting more help from tutors and learning support staff. They thought that this was more beneficial because they could ask for help and complete their work on time: 'Teachers in college made work more interesting, it wasn't dull like in school and it was easier because you got help from teachers and LSAs' (Frank).

Most of them found work easier to manage and lessons more interesting than in school. They enjoyed practical lessons because they saw their relevance to future work for which they were preparing. Most of the young people reported not being interested in academic work and wanting to do more practical work, although two were interested in academic work as well. They found the approach to teaching different in college than to school, and noted the benefits of continuous assessment in class as opposed to end-of-year examinations. However, the achievement rates from the college database, scrutinized as part of the documentary evidence analysis, showed that the achievement is equally good and above the national averages in BTEC and GCSE qualifications, the first of which uses continuous assessment and the second of which is assessed through end-of-year examinations.

The staff claimed that the whole-institutional approach to discipline reduced the number of serious incidents, as minor issues were dealt with immediately by the member of staff in question. The staff also asserted that the involvement of parents/carers in the disciplinary procedure was beneficial, because it made it clearer for them why their child had been disciplined, which prevented any misunderstandings and misconceptions in relation to the disciplinary procedure or sanctions.

From an examination of the differences in discipline, rules, and punishment in school and college, it emerged that this was also linked to students' notion of being treated like an adult, having more freedom, and having to take responsibility for their own actions. The young people thought that the strict discipline in school did not allow them any freedom or autonomy, whereas college placed more responsibility on them – which resulted in a more mature response. They

considered that the teachers in college dealt with problem behaviour better than teachers at school:

> They [teachers and LSAs] wouldn't make a big thing out of it. They would speak to students, sometimes outside of class, and let them cool down before they came back in class. I think this was good because some kids were immature and needed to be explained what they were doing wrong. If you were really naughty, they would call your parents and talked to them as well. But I liked when they called my mum when I was good, this had never happened at school, teachers in school only called my mum when I was naughty so I thought, 'What's the point?'
>
> (Peter)

They reported that the exercise of freedom and autonomy was also reflected in the relationships between the students and the teachers. In school, the teachers were giving orders and the pupils were expected to listen to them without questioning them, whether they were about the activities in the class or rules. In college, the teachers consulted students about the choice of activities, and discussed and negotiated rules within the class at the beginning of the year:

> They [teachers] never asked us in school what work we liked but in college we could choose what we liked doing – this helped a lot because it's easier to do work you are interested in.
>
> (Stephanie)

> I liked doing work in class in BTEC, I didn't like doing exams in the big hall – it was too stressful although teachers were nice. Everything seemed better in college – classes were smaller, you got help with your work and work was interesting – you know in English we got to do lyrics of my favourite songs and in maths we got to count the cars in the car park.
>
> (Stewart)

Although poor behaviour was also punished in college, the young people thought that the disciplinary procedure in college was fair because it allowed them to have their voice heard, which was not the case in school. They also thought that exclusion from college would have a longer-term consequence, such as not being able to enrol on a course they wanted to take in the following academic year.

An analysis of the macrosystem

Curriculum

Most young people spoke about the academic subjects that they had studied in school as being boring and having no direct relevance to the world of work, and were thus useless for gaining employability skills:

> I only got to do one afternoon in construction which wasn't enough, I wanted to do more practical courses. But it's OK, I got good qualifications and I did more courses in construction after [the completion of the programme].
>
> (Paul)

> I wanted to come to college because I wanted to do practical things. I think this is why I enjoyed college more than school.
>
> (Richard)

In contrast to academic subjects, they reasoned that vocational subjects that were more practical and offered hands-on experience in different vocational areas were beneficial for their future choice of careers and getting jobs. A majority of young people interviewed stated that the type of subjects on offer was the main cause of their disaffection with education in mainstream school.

They considered that the qualifications that they had achieved on the completion of the programme enabled them to enrol on mainstream courses within different areas in college. However, a minority of students expressed interest in studying more academic subjects alongside the vocational subjects while they were attending the programme. When GCSE qualifications were replaced with alternative qualifications in English and mathematics (Adult Literacy and Adult Numeracy were delivered in the academic year 2009/10; Functional Skills in English and Functional Skills in Mathematics in the academic year 2010/11), the students felt less motivated to study these subjects because they did not see the relevance of these qualifications to their further progression in education, employment, and training. In addition to this, the fact that they could not take the core qualifications that were offered in all mainstream schools reiterated their feelings of underachievement and not having the intellectual ability to study these subjects:

> They just told me and my mum that I wasn't allowed to come back to school and had to go to college instead. I wasn't happy about it because all my friends stayed in school and did their GCSEs. I wanted to do more GCSEs in college. My mum wasn't happy either because she didn't want me to get involved with some kids from my school who were already in college.
>
> (John)

> I liked the course but I wanted to do more GCSEs, we only did three and in school you do eight or more.
>
> (Stephanie)

Both staff and students considered that the mixture of academic and vocational subjects contributed to the young people's re-engagement with education, because they could see the relevance of the subjects they were studying to their future career opportunities. As a result, they changed their attitudes towards work set in class and towards education as a whole. The examination of the college database indicated that the students' achievement was higher than the national averages in most subjects that were offered on the programme in any given year. The analysis of student files indicated that most achieved higher grades in their GCSE exams than they were predicted to achieve had they stayed in mainstream schools. The participation in extra-curricular activities was also seen by the staff as beneficial in developing the various skills necessary for successful progression to further education, employment, and/or training.

The staff felt that the mixture of continuous and summative assessment, and academic and vocational subjects, was helpful for this cohort of students since it offered a broad education to them and allowed easier progression to post-16 education. The staff were unanimous in their views that the introduction of functional skills had had a negative impact on students' motivation, because they were not familiar with the alternative qualifications offered and thus did not see any value in studying them. As Teacher 1 stated, 'Students felt that they were studying these subjects instead of GCSEs because they were not clever enough to do GCSEs.'

However, data on students' examination outcomes revealed that the achievement in these subjects was higher than that in GCSE English and maths. The staff put this down to the curriculum content and mode of assessment, which were very different from those employed in GCSEs. They assessed different skills and appeared easier to achieve than the GCSE curriculum. The examinations were also conducted 'on demand', which meant that students took them when they were ready.

An analysis of the exosystem

Collaboration

As already noted above, both teachers and managers agreed that collaboration between different agencies was important. In addition to this, establishing good communication with parents/carers was seen as essential in gaining their support as well as informing them regularly about their children's attendance, behaviour, achievement, and any other needs that related to and impacted on their successful progress. According to Teacher 2, 'We spend on average an hour a day, sometimes even more, talking to parents either over the phone or in face-to-face interviews, be it to praise their child or to discuss discipline or other matters which arise.'

The rest of the staff confirmed this statement. The support and close relationship with referral agencies – local schools or pupil referral units – was emphasized because of their deeper insight into, and knowledge of, students' backgrounds and the support students had received prior to coming on the programme. Other external partners that were considered constructive in the support offered to students and staff included: the educational psychology service, careers advisers, the youth offending team, and social services. The staff noted that this level of support by the local authority (LA), which had facilitated inter-agency collaboration, had significantly diminished from 2009. The curriculum team leader at the time the study was conducted, who liaised closely with the quality assurance manager from the LA, added that the changes and cuts implemented by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government coincided with the diminished influence of the LA on the programme.

The examination of documentary evidence indicated that the programme's processes and documents responded effectively to the requirements set out by the collaboration agreement. This agreement between the programme and the LA formed the basis of a quality assurance designed to assess whether the programme adequately addressed and catered for individual students' needs.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of an AEP in the London Borough of East End on students' achievement and progression. In addition to this, through Bronfenbrenner's ecosystem approach, it examined the separate and combined impact of different factors on students' disengagement with the mainstream school curriculum for 14- to 16-year-olds. This study, thus, contributes to the current discussion on the organization and structure of 14–19 education in England in the wake of the RPA.

The research findings confirmed that any investigation into educational disengagement requires an examination of the complex multitude of factors that underlie it. The description of students' backgrounds, the analysis of their experiences of education, and the reasons for their disaffection with mainstream education that emerged from the interviews as well as from group discussions and interviews with the programme staff and management, confirmed the usefulness of applying Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994) ecological systems theory to guide the research design in this study. Thus, it is argued here that to successfully tackle educational disengagement, all of these factors need to be taken into account and an adequate intervention put in place to address them. Some of these factors, such as the economic, community, parent, and peer group influences, would be difficult to change through education policies alone. But those factors that relate to school, education, qualifications policy, pedagogy, curriculum, and a high-quality workforce certainly can be changed by government policies on education. Areas that have been highlighted in this study include the need for appropriate and engaging curriculum and

qualifications reforms that are designed for the whole 14–19 cohort. In addition, teacher training programmes (both initial and continuing professional development) need to emphasize more explicitly curriculum design, motivational pedagogy, developing effective relationships between learners and teachers, consistent behaviour management, working collaboratively with external agencies, and a focus on all learners progressing to further study and employment.

The research findings from student interviews and group discussions with the programme staff indicated that the learners not only valued the well-recognized qualifications that were on offer in mainstream schools, but that they also responded well to practical and vocational learning. This suggests that solutions lie in the creation of qualifications that include a balance of both academic and vocational subjects and modes of assessment, with work-related provision for *all* students. The aim of any education system should be to raise all children's aspirations, regardless of their backgrounds, and to ensure that educational provision is suitable for all types of learners, including those with SEN and those experiencing SEBD. This means allowing the use of different teaching strategies, learning experiences, and an effective assessment system to suit the needs of all types of learners. The introduction of the English Baccalaureate performance measure, with its aim of increasing the number of learners gaining high grades in five specific GCSEs (English, mathematics, science, geography/history, and a language other than English) to age 16, regardless of whether they are intending to continue on vocational or academic routes, will undoubtedly have a negative impact on the type of learners who are the subject of this study. This research casts some light on this change in national policy.

The introduction of RPA to the age of 18 in 2015 requires all young people to stay in education or training for longer; but whether the attendance, retention, and achievement of the young people who experience SEBD will be satisfactory depends very much on the curriculum, pedagogy, and pastoral care offered to them.

Notes on the contributors

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This paper was published in a special feature on education in London, edited by Tamjid Mujtaba. The other articles in the feature are as follows (links unavailable at time of publication):

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Elsewhere in the journal

London Review of Education, 9 (2) – a special issue titled 'Educating 14–19 year olds in the new political and economic context', and edited by Ann Hodson and Ken Spours. The issue contained the following articles:

Fuller, A., and Unwin, L. (2011) 'Vocational education and training in the spotlight: Back to the future for the UK's Coalition Government?'. *London Review of Education*, 9 (2), 191–204.

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