DISENGAGEMENT FROM EDUCATION AMONG 14-16 YEAR OLDS

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Background

This study uses data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) to carry out a quantitative analysis of disengagement from education among 14-16 year olds in England. The implications of disengagement for the young person and for wider society are well known and lead to poor labour market opportunities and the risk of being "not in education, employment or training", as well as other associated negative outcomes. The engagement of young people is particularly crucial in relation to recent legislation raising the participation age, first to 17 by the year 2013, and then 18 by 2015. For this study an analytical approach was used that enables the capturing of different kinds of disengagement, creating a typology of engaged / disengaged young people.

Key findings

The study identified four general types of engaged or disengaged young people:

• ‘Engaged’ young people, who were highly engaged with school and aspired to continue with fulltime education to degree level. They represented 40% of young people in Year 9, 33% in Year 10, and 34% of young people in Year 11

• Young people who were ‘disengaged from school not education’. They disliked school and were more likely to skip classes, but otherwise aspired to continue with fulltime education to degree level. They represented 23% of young people in Year 9, 26% in Year 10, and 25% of young people in Year 11

• Young people who were ‘engaged with school not higher education’. They were generally positive about school and aspired to continue with education or training in Year 12, but not higher education. They represented 25% of young people in Year 9 and 22% in Year 10 and 11.

• ‘Disengaged’ young people who had much lower aspirations, disliked school and were far more likely to play truant. They represented 12% of young people in Year 9, 19% in Year 10, and 20% in Year 11

• Those most at risk of disengaging were white, males, and young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds

• Factors that appear to make a difference include schools working with parents, parental aspirations, information and guidance, homework supervision, extra curricula activity, study support, quality of the relationship with teachers, the curriculum, reducing bullying and the school culture of truancy

• The majority of young people were either engaged or disengaged from education by the time they were in Year 9. Nevertheless about 14% of young people disengaged to some degree in Year 10 when starting their Key Stage 4 qualifications
Methodology

A shortcoming of much of the previous quantitative research in this area stems from a narrow definition of disengagement. Most often disengagement has been defined as poor attainment, or high levels of truancy. However, these kinds of definitions fail to take account of the variation in young people’s ability, or in the case of truancy, the large number of young people who continue to turn up at school but fail to really engage with their education. Instead, disengagement is arguably a multi-dimensional concept, which can be expressed in the form of young people’s motivations, attitudes and behaviour.

In order to identify a typology of engaged / disengaged young people a statistical technique called latent class analysis (LCA) was employed. LCA is appropriate for identifying types or groups of individuals which are not directly observable from the data, and is especially useful for measuring multi-dimensional concepts such as disengagement. An extension of the standard latent class approach called latent transition analysis (LTA), which enables the exploration of transitions between the different types over time, was then used to identify when as well as why some young people disengage.

Data for this analysis comes from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) a comprehensive study following the lives of a cohort of young people completing their compulsory schooling in 2006. Data are collected on an annual basis beginning in 2004 when the young people were in year nine. For this analysis the focus is on the first three years of the study which relate to school years 9, 10 and 11, although destinations in Year 12 are also examined.

Results

Four main types of engaged / disengaged young people were identified. These were:

‘Engaged’: ‘Engaged’ young people aspire to continue with their education in the long term. They also have very positive attitudes to school and show very few signs of truanting. The large majority (87 per cent) achieve Level 2 qualifications at Key Stage 4 and almost all (95%) continue with full time education in Year 12. They have very positive relationships with their teachers and are generally accepting of school rules and discipline. They are also more likely to enjoy the curriculum and feel confident in their ability to achieve well. Doing well at school is important to these young people, and they are by far the most likely to recognise the importance of working hard to improve their future prospects. ‘Engaged’ young people also report little misbehaviour in class, and are far less likely to engage in risky behaviours.

‘Engaged’ represented 40 per cent of the population of 13/14 year olds in Year 9, falling to 33/34 per cent of young people in Years 10 and 11.

‘Disengaged from school not education’: Young people who are ‘disengaged from school not education’ are also very likely to aspire to continue with education in the long term. However they have more negative attitudes to school, and are more likely to play truant. The large majority still achieve Level 2 qualifications (71 per cent), and most (85 per cent) continue with full time education in Year 12. However, this is slightly fewer than the proportion who had intended to stay on (98 per cent) which suggests that disengaging from school may, for some, be associated with a failure to achieve the grades they required, or further disengagement in Year 12. These young people are more likely to have problems with school rules and discipline and are more likely to report misbehaving in class. They are less likely to believe that working hard at school will help them get on later in life. A third or more engage in risky behaviours including drinking, smoking, and trying cannabis.

Young people ‘disengaged from school not education’ represented 23 per cent of the population of 13/14 year olds in Year 9. This increased to 26 per cent in Year 10, and then fell to 25 per cent in Year 11.

‘Engaged with school not higher education’: This group are reasonably likely to aspire to continue with fulltime education in Year 12, but not in the longer term. They are also very unlikely to play truant and have moderate to positive attitudes to school. Two fifths of these young people achieve Level 2 at Key Stage 4, but most achieved Level 1. Three fifths also continue in full time education in Year 12 and a fifth are in work with training. However a further fifth are either in work without training, or not in education, employment or training (NEET). They are generally accepting of school rules and discipline, and have very positive relationships with their teachers, although they are a little more likely to report misbehaving than ‘engaged’ young people. They prefer Information, Communication and
Technology to academic subjects, and feel more confident in their ability for this subject. These young people are more likely to recognise the importance of working hard at school, although not to the extent of 'engaged' young people. They are also less likely to engage in any kind of risky behaviour.

Young people who were ‘engaged with school not higher education’ represented 25 per cent of 13/14 year olds in Year 9, this fell to 22 per cent in Years 10 and 11.

‘Disengaged’: ‘Disengaged’ young people are far less likely to aspire to continue with full time education. They are also much more likely to play truant and have very poor attitudes to school. Although most of these young people achieve Level 1 qualifications, over a third leave school with little or no qualifications. The destinations of these young people are also much poorer, with two fifths in a job with no training, and over a quarter NEET in Year 12. ‘Disengaged’ young people are far more hostile to school than other young people. The majority believe there are far too many rules and over a third claim to like few, if any, of their teachers. On the curriculum, they are far more likely to enjoy and feel confident studying Information, Communication and Technology than traditional academic subjects. They are more likely to choose subjects they think they will do well in, but also those in which they like the teacher, or which their friends are also studying. Over two fifths of these young people don’t think about their future much, and around one fifth will just ‘wait and see’ where they end up. These young people are also far more likely to engage in risky behaviour: 43 per cent drink regularly, and over half have tried cigarettes and/or cannabis. One fifth have also engaged in crimes against property, and nearly two fifths in fights or public disturbances.

‘Disengaged’ represented 12 per cent of 13/14 year olds in Year 9, but this increased to 19/20 per cent of young people in Year 10 and 11.

Disengagement over time

Most young people were already engaged or disengaged by the time they were in Year 9 and remained so throughout the last three years of compulsory schooling. However 14 per cent disengaged or further disengaged (i.e. move group) in Year 10. This represents a critical point where young people start their Key Stage 4 qualifications, a transition that some young people might find more difficult than others.

Starting new courses, young people may be split up from established friendship groups, and the increase in the volume and the significance of coursework might also prove a little too much for some. Procedures that schools have in place to monitor young people’s progress might well benefit from paying particular attention during this period. There was also very little evidence of young people re-engaging over the period.

Risk factors

Those most at risk of disengaging were white, males, and young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

Factors that may help or hinder engagement

Schools working with parents

One key finding is the importance of the relationship between schools and parents. This relationship included providing parents with clear information on how the young person is getting on, but also information on the ways that they, as parents, could help in their child’s education. Where there was evidence of a more positive relationship with parents young people were more likely to be engaged with school, but also with education in the longer term.

Parental aspirations

Parental aspirations were strongly associated with young people’s engagement, particularly with their desire to remain in education. We must be cautious in imbuing too much causality to this relationship, as parents may simply be responding to and adapting their aspirations in accordance to their child’s own preferences and achievements. Nevertheless, other studies have shown the importance of aspirations for helping some young people overcome disadvantage.

Information and Guidance

‘Disengaged’ young people were especially likely to want a job that paid well, yet they appear far less likely than others to recognise the importance of working hard at school to achieve this aim. There is now an abundance of social science evidence illustrating the difference in outcomes associated with varying levels of GCSE qualifications. This information needs to be conveyed clearly to these young people in Year 9, before they start their GCSE qualifications. It also needs to be done in a way that is relevant to them, perhaps focusing on the associated financial rewards.
**Supervision of Homework**
Low supervision of homework by teachers was identified as important for all types of disengagement, but was especially important for ‘disengaged’ young people. Supervision of homework is considered important to ensure that some young people do not disengage as a result of falling behind and feeling overwhelmed by their coursework.

**Extra Curricula Activity**
Making sports facilities available for young people to use outside of lessons, and providing school clubs and societies may reduce the risk of disengagement. Young people who used school sports facilities at least once a week were a little less likely to be ‘engaged with school not higher education’ and less likely to be ‘disengaged’. Those who participated in a school club or society at least once a week were half as likely to be ‘disengaged’.

**Study Support**
Participation in study support may also help with a young person’s engagement. Attending additional teacher led classes in preparation for exams, simple ‘drop in’ classes where young people could study on their own or with friends, or attending classes in the school holidays were all associated with a reduced risk of disengagement.

**Relationships with teachers**
Relationships that young people have with their teachers are especially critical to their engagement, particularly with the school. Compared with the ‘engaged’, all young people were less likely to perceive their teachers as being in control, but especially those disengaged from school. They were also more likely to feel unfairly treated and blamed for any trouble in class, and less likely to feel their teachers took an interest in their work. Of course some young people may be particularly difficult to manage, but if teachers are able to foster positive relationships where pupils feel they are being fairly treated and are given appropriate praise, then this may well contribute to their engagement.

**Curriculum**
Compared with ‘engaged’ young people, other young people were more likely to feel confident and enjoy studying Information, Communication and Technology than traditional academic subjects. Changes to the 14-19 curriculum including plans to expand the diploma system and offer more opportunities to study vocational subjects could help to engage more young people.

**Bullying**
There was a clear association between being bullied in the last 12 months and disengaging from school. Schools need to ensure they have good policies for identifying and treating instances of bullying, as it can have such detrimental effects to a child’s wellbeing, their engagement, and ultimately their qualifications and future prospects.

**School factors**
The amount of truancy that occurs within a school can have an impact on that school’s culture of engagement. Young people are more likely to be ‘engaged with school not higher education’ or ‘disengaged’ in schools with greater levels of truancy. Thus not only does truancy impact on those who play truant, it might also impact on the educational engagement of other young people within the same school. Schools therefore need to ensure they have high quality strategies for dealing with truancy.

**Additional Information**
The full report (DCSF-RR178) can be accessed at [www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/)

Further information about this research can be obtained from Vikki McAuley, Young People Analysis Division, N6, DCSF, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ

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The views expressed in this report are the authors’ and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.