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Those Who Bother and Those Who Don't

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Introduction

School non-attendance is a major concern for all of the English speaking education systems. It is a significant agenda item in Australia and the USA continues to worry the present British Labour government. The British government has challenged the system to reduce the rate of truancy. This has resulted in a substantial allocation of resources dedicated to that end. Yet, to-date, there is little evidence that this is impacting positively on the pattern of pupil non-attendance. On the contrary, recent research findings confirm that far from impacting positively on the problem, more pupils are avoiding school – or at least, absenting themselves for some part of the school day (New Philanthropic Society, 2005). What is equally evident is that this trend in the pattern of school attendance is a feature of other systems as noted above and the challenge to find effective ways of encouraging students to develop a positive attitude towards school attendance is common across countries that operate a policy of compulsory school attendance.

What is a little surprising is that for all the attention paid to truancy that as Gabb, S. (1994) points out, there is no agreed definition of 'truancy' and not one of the British education acts actually offers a clear definition of the term.

Over recent years, a substantial amount of research has been undertaken into the potential causes of non-attendance and a whole library of literature has been produced. What is less common however is substantive evaluation of the efficacy of the initiatives that attempt to address the challenge of truancy. Croll and Moses (2005) recently undertook a longitudinal study in which amongst other things, they demonstrate that less satisfactory educational trajectories are highly changeable and may therefore be susceptible to educational interventions to make successful outcomes available to all young people. Such a finding highlights the importance of undertaking closer and more thorough evaluation and analysis of the many interventions that have been instigated to address the issue of non-attendance at both primary and secondary sectors. The majority of work however, seems to have been undertaken into determining why pupils elect not to attend.

It is perhaps no surprise that much of the research into the causes of non-attendance tend not to be located within narrow geographical parameters but rather, they cross international borders and are common in their nature – irrespective of geographical location.

This research draws attention to the fact that there is a wide diversity of views as to the causal factors (Adams, 1978). Some suggest that truancy is the effects of a sick society; others attempt to account for it as the result of the abandonment of religious beliefs and moral values. Others see non-attendance as a direct consequence of an unjust social and economic system, whilst still others claim that it is the result of damage to nervous systems through urban pollution. There is however, considerable research in support of a

set of common general patterns that can be traced and which place certain pupils at greater risk of not attending school than is the case with others. Family background, school ethos and management, loom large amongst these.

Within-Home and Within-Child Factors

Factors such as poverty and poor parental expectations, as well as inadequate guidance and supervision, have long been identified as factors that researchers have cited as significant. This has been cited as an important causal factor as long ago as the 19th century (e.g. Kline, 1898; Healy, 1915). Others cite the cyclic patterns observable in many truants' histories. Pupils, who truant, frequently come from families where the parents too had a record of irregular school attendance when they were pupils. Similarly, many truants seem attracted to other truants. Robins and others (Robins *et al*, 1979) suggest that once established, it may become hereditary – persistent truants tend to marry persistent truants and tolerate truancy in their children.

Other respected researchers (e.g. Reid, 1982) have long claimed that truants often exhibit a low level of self-esteem and tend to be unconcerned with their appearance (Tyerman, 1968). Gabb (op. cit.) suggests that for those who view truancy in this way – as symbolic of difficulties experienced by the pupils or a factor of a malfunctioning home background, see the problem as very much that of the child's and hence, any attempt at address it would demand the readjustment of the pupil.

Many others have sought for an answer within the school setting. Such a search was given considerable credence through the work of Carroll *et al* (1977) who looked at schools in South Wales and challenged the 'within child' assumptions about truancy as a result of finding that patterns of attendance varies considerably between them – despite very similar characteristics of catchment populations. Suggesting that the problem lay less within the child and more within the school. This school of thought was given added momentum in the wake of work done by Rutter and his colleagues (Rutter *et al* 1997).

Some Within-School Factors

Failure in schools to identify those 'at risk' and to provide them with the appropriate support and opportunities is also seen as an important causal factor that can result in many pupils deciding not to attend school. Others are seen as being almost encouraged to miss school due to the tedium generated by some teachers in the way they prepare and present their work. Nardi, E. & Steward, S. (2002) found that some pupils often see the content of their lessons as 'boring' and perceive them as the presentation of an 'isolated body of knowledge' that does not relate to the pupils lives and can not be perceived as relevant to their future. Along side this, the fact that some lessons are presented within a climate that encourages independent work and do not provide opportunities for pupils to work collaboratively with peers to support their understanding, results in pupils rejecting formal education.

Poor pupil-teacher relationship is seen by many as being at the heart of the problem and again, there is substantial evidence that where relationships are strained, there is a tendency for many young people to avoid the experience by excluding themselves from such lessons (Cicourel and Kituse, 1963; Carson, Gleeson and Wardhaugh, 1992). Claims are also made that what is equally significant is that many teachers hold low expectations of some pupils – often those who are most at risk of becoming disenchanted with the educational process. Those low expectations can be enough to encourage these pupils to avoid school by absenting themselves.

Other school-based factors that have been cited as potentially problematic include schools that operate on a high student/teacher ration; schools that have an inadequate

parental/school communication structure and involvement and schools that operate administrative policies that are too weak or too rigid.

In searching for causal factors, a feature that emerges is that whilst most parents think it's important that children attend school regularly, parents perceived the main cause of truancy to be bullying, problems with teachers & peer pressure – within-school factors. LEAs and teachers on the other hand, believe that parental attitudes and home environments are more influential (Malcolm,H, Wilson,V. Davidson,J. & Kirk,S. 2003)

The Present Study

The present study takes a two-fold approach. In the first instance, it seeks to test the outcomes of existing research about the views of persistent non-attenders, their parents, teachers and Education Welfare Officers as to why they chose to exclude themselves. This part of the exercise is now complete with the support of Bristol City Council

Secondly, the study examines the problem of non-attendance obliquely by asking the question '**why do students in a certification driven system but who will not achieve recognised levels of certification, attend school and engage in learning?**' Drawing on the voices of young people, the project provides some indications of what aspects of school encourage attendance. Alongside this, the organisation, management and teaching and learning processes of those schools most successful in keeping students engaged will be explored. Both sets of data will provide lessons that all schools can draw upon to combat non-attendance and improve their relationships with all students. This part of the project is in its infancy but we report here some emerging results based on findings to-date.

Part 1: Non-attenders in Bristol Schools

This part of our work was undertaken as a direct consequence of a growing concern by officers and elected members on Bristol City Council regarding the non-attendance profile of students in the City's schools. We interviewed a number of students identified by the Education Welfare Service (EWS) as persistent non-attenders, their parents, senior members of the management staff in schools, Education Welfare Officers (EWOs) and attendance officers in secondary schools. A designated member of the City's task force looking at the attendance problems at that time approved the selection of all informants as being appropriate for the task.

The Interviewing Process

Student interviewees were invited to attend the university for an interview. Each interviewee was invited to bring a friend and the process followed what is known as "paired pal interviews." It was felt that young people were less likely to be intimidated by the process if they had immediate recourse to a friend. A semi-structured interview schedule was used but each interviewer sought to make the interview as informal and conversation-like as possible.

Thirteen students were interviewed and each interview lasted around forty-five minutes. We provide below "profiles" of the students and general comments on them below. All students were asked to review their school life from primary school onwards. The length of student responses varied as would be expected in such circumstances but all of them provided a perspective on school and schooling. Parents were interviewed in their homes and professionals in their place of work using a semi structured interview schedule. Anonymity was guaranteed to all interviewees and all names have been changed to ensure this.

Factors Identified by Students

What was noticeable at all interviews was that even the most reticent students, those given time to talk but spoke little did so in an intelligent and logical manner. Contrary to the media stereotypes of young people such as these they are not inarticulate, unable to deal with arguments. They spoke with passion and conviction about their present and past circumstances. But it is important to remark that this is a particular group of young people and that their views and opinions may or may not be representative of all persistent truants.

Despite that cautionary note, there are some important themes that come through the student interviews - and some of these are also reflected in the data gathered from parents and professional. We identify these themes below.

- The young people are able to identify with clarity the processes that resulted in them becoming non-attenders.
- They make sense of their past experience - and some of them were able to comment on how those experiences will contribute to their futures, particularly the possibility of further training and employment.
- In contrast to professionals (and in contrast to much of the existing literature), they do not see the content of the curriculum as a problem for them.
- They see the quality of personal relationships at school primarily in terms of relationships with staff, rather than the subjects individuals teach.
- They identify the quality of relationships with staff in terms of what they see as 'mutual respect' and being treated in an 'adult fashion'.
- They perceive teaching as an individual, rather than a group activity and see teaching as explanation rather than instruction.
- The male students reported that relationship problems were mainly with the staff of schools (as opposed to peers).
- Peer relationships are more significant for female students.
- Bullying and intimidation by other students was seen as a problem for many of those interviewed and often precedes the decision not to attend school.
- Contrary to much of the previous literature, our interviewees tended not to come from families within which there is a history of non-attendance.
- Many expressed the view that they had found alternative educational provision preferable to school.
- Transition from primary school to secondary and from Year 9 to 10 is problematic and for many, may lead to non-attendance.

Parental Perspectives

There was no evidence from the views expressed by parents of an anti-school/education culture in the home. This is in sharp contrast to some of the evidence of earlier researchers referred to above. All the parents were eager for their children to attend school and felt they themselves had been deprived of education. There was much in common between the views expressed by parents and those provided by the students regarding the significance of student/teacher relationships in influencing student behaviour regarding school avoidance. They did however, identify some important points of interest.

- Home/school communication systems are poor.
- Schools are deemed to be arrogant towards parents and students.
- For some parents, the Education Welfare Service as a whole is not seen as a major source of support.
- Learning mentors, Connexions personnel, alternative providers and individual Education Welfare Officers are identified as helpful.

- The content of the curriculum is not regarded as problematic and it is useful in career terms.
- Alternative provision works to get students to re-engage with learning.
- Schools need to address the problem of bullying in a more effective manner.
- Parents are eager for their children to attend and be successful in school.

Findings- Professionals

There are some interesting contrasts between the way that professionals interviewed saw the problem, compared with the views of parent and student. While professionals identified the content and rigidity of the curriculum as problematic, students and parents do not. What professionals see as 'teaching' is different from what students identify as 'teaching'. Students see teaching as individual explanation and consistent one-to-one attention. Professionals offered the view that for them, teaching was regarded as a group activity.

Secondary Senior Manager

- Local circumstances within the area of the schools involved in the enquiry are such, that employment was felt to be easy to find - resulting in a view amongst students (and parents to a lesser degree) that school is of little relevance.
- The nature of the curriculum and its content is inappropriate for many students.
- Curriculum is too rigidly defined and more local control of its content is needed.
- Close relationships between F.E. and school are needed for many 14+ students.
- Attendance can be improved for those students with a 60-70% record of attendance.
- Points of transition are triggers to non-attendance.
- A strategic LEA policy is needed, for instance, to stop non-attenders simply transferring from one school to another.
- There is a lack of synergy between the decisions of schools, and appeals panels.
- Funding alternative provision is a major resource problem for many schools because funding follows pupils.
- Positive rewards for attendance are needed, such as trips to ten pin bowling stadiums etc.
- Relationships are only a problem for "disaffected" students, students often use problems with relationships as an excuse for non-attendance.

Education Welfare Officers

Four Education Welfare Officers were interviewed. Two were new to the service and two had been in post for a substantial period of time. There is a difference in how they see the role, although there are of course, major points of agreement between them. For instance, although they all identify the need for attendance to be a priority for all schools, for newer staff it should be the highest priority. The following significant points were raised by the EWOs interviewed:

- EWOs have a main responsibility for liaising with schools and other services over issues of attendance.
- Newer EWOs perceive their title as inappropriate since their role is concerned with 'attendance' not 'welfare'.
- Those who had been longer in the service however, identify welfare work as important and significant.
- Schools must have attendance as a priority.
- Legal justice system should be used more regularly and more effectively.
- The law needs to be tightened up on attendance (newer officers).
- Timescale in dealing with non-attendance takes too long.
- A range of home circumstances is seen as significant. In particular, those relating to economic and social deprivation, substance misuse and illness.

- The deterrents to non-attendance should be publicised more effectively (newer officers).
- Prosecution has improved children's lives because they now attend school more regularly as a result.
- There should be more surveillance to locate truants – and to prevent it initially.
- Older EWOs see their role as that of acting as a go-between between school and parents.
- They also believe that they act as an advocate on behalf of the truanting students and the parents (older officers)
- Special Educational Needs and the curriculum are a problem for many students and a cause of disillusion with schooling.
- Alternatives are not necessarily the answer. The dropout rate for alternative provision is quite high.
- Young people need to be respected and made to feel worthwhile.

School Attendance Officer

The one School Attendance Officer employed at one of the schools involved in this survey came into the role from a background in fine art and having been a learning mentor. She stressed the fact that her youth helped her to get on well with the students. She claimed an insider/outsider view because although she is member of school staff she is not a teacher.

- Substance abuse has a major influence on school attendance - particularly for attendance in the afternoon.
- Some families do not particularly value education and that have a culture of non-attendance.
- Nevertheless, these families are resourceful.
- For female students, peer relationships are a major problem leading to non-attendance.
- For male students, relationships with staff may be a particularly problematic factor.
- Many members of staff do not have the skills necessary to interact positively with students. They intimidate but do not realise that they are in a power relationship and are seen as such by students.
- Alternative education is often a solution but it brings with it a resource issue.
- Many young people have narrow horizons and need to be encouraged to expand these.
- There is a need for schools to employ more non-teaching staff such as learning mentors and Learning Support Assistants.
- Provision should be tailored to address local needs.

Phase 2

A sample of students from years 9 and 10 identified by the school on the basis that they appropriately meet the criteria – namely:

- Students likely to be entered for the lowest tier in GCSE mathematics.
- Students in the lowest sets of for English and Science but not those formally identified as having special educational needs.
- Students identified by the school as likely to attend part-time FE provision
- Students who have a robust school attendance profile.

Students were interviewed in pairs or in small groups and encouraged to discuss a range of issues relating to their perceptions of schooling and their attitude towards non-attendance. In addition we interviewed teachers engaged with the students and also gathered anecdotal comments from the head teacher of one of the schools the students attended. As the project proceeds it is intended that a sample of the students' teachers are selected using the following criteria and are being interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule:

- Teachers who regularly teach the classes the students attend
- Teachers who take responsibility for tracking and targeting the academic progression of the student sample
- Senior teachers responsible for the organisation of setting/streaming from year 9
- Teachers with pastoral responsibility for the sample group.

Schools will be asked to identify parents who they believe would be willing and interested to discuss issues of attendance. A sample of these parents will be interviewed. In addition data from a wider range of professionals involved in supporting these students and their school in promoting attendance and progression is also to be gathered using Nominal Group Technique alongside more conventional Focus Group discussion.

- Connexions personnel
- School mentors
- Police and community officers
- Educational welfare officers
- Social workers
- Parents

Work done to-date has begun to give us some interesting and useful data. This is to be built on significantly over the next academic year. We focus here on the students' comments and also in detail on a teacher's perspective.

The Students

Two groups of student who attended rather different schools were interviewed in their schools. The first group attended Keylock Secondary School and are referred to as the Keylock group. The second group attended Garden Secondary School and are referred to as the Garden group. The two schools serve very different communities. Keylock serves one of the most economically and socially disadvantaged "white" communities in the city. It has a very high proportion of students identified as having special educational needs many of whom receive extra support via the special needs budget. Garden has a wide catchment area and has a high proportion of students from middle class or aspiring working class families. The number of students with special educational needs is in line with the national average according to its last national (OfSTED) report.

Keylock students

Eighteen students (eight girls and ten boys) were interviewed. They had been selected by the school but were asked to give their own consent. Three of the students had and continued to experience difficulties with school. They had extremely challenging behaviour and in their own words, "loose it a lot of the time". These three had all had periods of school exclusion and one of them had been permanently excluded from another secondary school. One of the other students was identified by the school as experiencing quite severe learning difficulties. None of the students was expected by the school or by themselves to attain any kind of certificate that would be valued in the world outside school. As a group they met the criteria usually used to identify persistent non-attenders.

They were interviewed in groups of four and selected which group they would like to be in. They made their selection on friendship patterns and on the criterion that they were in the same class. Discussions were relatively free wheeling and students were encouraged to engage in a conversation with each other and the researcher rather than treating the event as an interview. As might be expected some of the students were more forthcoming and confident than others.

Garden Secondary School Students

As we Keylock they were interviewed in groups that were self-selected. Overall we talked to seventeen (five girls and twelve boys) students in three groups. They were articulate and open even a very shy girl who was encouraged to join the discussion by her peers. They were likely to achieve higher certificates than their Keylock peers but even so very unlikely to meet the critical grade "C". Although we had no information about the students' families they gave the impression of being relatively prosperous. All of the students had clear ideas about what they wished to do after they left school.

- **Provides a social space**

It was not uncommon for the students interviewed to tell us that they liked to come to school, not least because it's a place where you can 'make new friends' and meet those who are already your 'friends.' One of the boys who had been excluded said, "well its sort like a place you can talk an that ..I don't get into fights here." One of the girls said "when I come I meet my mates and we have a laugh and that." (Keylock) Another Garden School boy interviewed told us that,

'Making friends in school helps you socialise outside'.

A characteristic found in many of those interviewed suggests that they possess a degree of maturity that serves them well. This is demonstrated in the thoughtful way that they describe the social value of school:

"School is the place where you make most friends – but you also lose them there too – if they do things you don't like.' (Garden School Boy "when you come to school you can find out how to keep friends." (Keylock girl)

- **Feel safe**

Despite concerns about bullying expressed by some of our interviewees, they drew our attention to the fact that they were mature enough not to be intimidated by the pressures placed on them by peers and felt safe enough within the school context to take initiative and to arrive at their own decisions:

"We're motivated enough to make up our own minds and decisions. We don't just do what others tell us to do." (Garden School Boy)

We put the comments on bullying made by the non-attenders to the Keylock groups. They rejected bullying as reason for not attending school. Commenting on peer bullying identified by girls the typical response was,

"They'd say that anyway it's not good not going to school." Keylock in particular rejected the idea that teachers are a problem.

"No it's not like that in my other school they didn't really learn you properly but here they help you and talk nice to you." (Keylock boy previously excluded.)

In conversation with the head of Keylock School he stated that wanted the school to be a place in which bullying did not happen and a place where it was not part of the culture. The students from Keylock endorsed this.

Curriculum and Pedagogy

The literature on truancy and non-attendance places the nature of the curriculum and pedagogy as a major reason for school rejection. Our professional informants shared this view. As we noted above it was not the view of those who were regular non-attenders. The students from the two schools were rather more critical.

Keylock students accepted that some aspects of the school curriculum were absolutely necessary for life after school. Typical comments were:

“Yeah you need maths and English but that other stuff you know geography and French they don’t help you.”

This acceptance of subjects that can be defined as core or key skills was common to both groups. They had more positive ideas about the nature of the curriculum. Keylock students felt that the curriculum should be vocational.

“It should like be hairdressing and beauty things because I want to be a beauty worker.. oh what’s it called?”

“My brother he’s on the buildings and I think we should learn that in school.”

“I want to be a mechanic, leading to becoming a lorry driver. Being a mechanic would then be a ‘fall-back’. To do this, I’ll need science, maths and English – and a bit of tech”

Both groups of students showed that at their level they were able to offer not just a critique of the curriculum but positive ideas about what it ought to contain. Interestingly the students at Keylock made no criticisms of teaching although they accepted that different teachers taught in different ways.

- **Relates to world of work**

Time again these students raise issues relating to the fact that school attendance will have a major impact on their future lives – and not least, in terms of securing work. They see a clear correlation between the work they do at school and their aspirations for the future.

‘I come to school because I want to leave school with something behind me – pass your exams and get a good job

‘To get good exam results and a good job and to find out what you can do and what you can’t.’

- **Teaches you to work**

The development of a work ethic is seen by several of those interviewed as an intrinsic and valued attribute of school attendance. This again linked closely to the value of an academic record that will potentially assist them in gaining – *and sustaining* – employment. This question of learning how to work was not a feature of the responses of non-attenders. The non-attenders focused on personal relationships with their teachers typically,

“You have to respect them but they don’t do it to you.”

Students from both the schools identified a value in school in helping to learn not just skills and knowledge for work but learning how to work.

“There’s some things you don’t like but you have to do them like what happens in work.” (Keylock boy)

“My sister says that you have to bored at work but you have to do it.” (Keylock girl)

- **Without it there will be problems**

The structure that school provides for these students is seen as significant. They value the way that school attendance and the regulations (to a degree) of school life, as providing them with not only a safe environment, but a code of being that will be valued long after they leave compulsory schooling.

A Teacher

We comment here on the remarks of a teacher who views the question of school attendance in a rather different way to the senior managers. She sees value in school but is also prepared to be critical of what it provides for students not well set up to achieve.

She is an English teacher not prepared to “give up the subject” but concerned to think how it might be more useful to students.

“I try to make it more practical get them to use lots of ICT they can see that as relevant and it is for work its not sort of aimed at the high academic ones but they find it fun and can do it.”

Her conversation shows her to be very critical of the way students are classified as academic and not academic as likely achievers or not. She sees this as likely to lead to disaffection. She also claims that this kind of organisation leads to different sorts of relationships between staff and students.

“You can see the way that the good kids are treated they are given more space respected more so it’s a really interesting thing that the low achievers still come.”

It is interesting that she notes a difference in the quality of relationship here and that chimes with the views of non-attenders but not really of attenders. Her comments are she says represent the views of teachers like her, fairly recently qualified and alive to the way in which the curriculum and pedagogy ought to engage students. Her main criticism is that the curriculum ought to maintain the traditional values of her subject, English, but it should also be seen as practical and useful by the students. She is sceptical of the structure of

the current curriculum and looks forward to the release of time and variety that the changes proposed by Curriculum 2000 might bring.

Discussion

It is as well to remind ourselves that schooling is compulsory for almost all young people. Consequently, we suggest that its effect is to pathologise school 'non-attendance'. Students who do not attend school are necessarily a problem for schools, authorities and the political community – but 'non-attendance', of itself, is not necessarily a problem for the student. Indeed, in our research brought us into contact with young people for whom self-withdrawal is a *solution* to a problem. It is not the task of research to prejudge, nor to leave assumptions unquestioned – our task is to aid understanding, not to justify. Hence, while not dismissing the dilemmas of school authorities, we stand back from the assumption that 'non-attendance' is a problem – and suggest that the term *self-withdrawal* is less prejudicial.

Compulsion is of limited use in analysing the issues surrounding self-withdrawal. It may be more helpful to think of a *contract* between student and school. Schools insist upon compulsion and compliance, but in exchange offer a safe environment, meaningful and relevant learning, opportunities for association with friends, and dignified and respectful treatment. All such systems rely upon consent – there has to be benefit (the legal term is 'consideration') on both sides. Sustaining this contract makes for stability and the potential for educational productivity – it is where the contract is broken that dilemmas occur and where situations become unpredictable.

Self-withdrawal emerges in our research as evidence of a contractual breakdown, though we will see that in the accounts of young people and their parents, that breakdown has happened before the decision to self-withdraw is made – indeed, the breakdown often provokes withdrawal. Young people interviewed – some backed up in independent conversation with their parents – identify with some clarity the breakdown of the agreed, albeit implicit, contract. They do not feel dignified or respected; some do not feel safe and protected.

There are, of course, limitations to this work must be acknowledged. First, the sample was small and select - it was an opportunity sample. No claims are made about how representative the data is of larger populations of students, parents and professionals in Bristol. Of course, it is *typical* of such populations and, insofar as it reflects other accounts from other research studies elsewhere, it achieves a wider general validity. Nonetheless, we submit these findings to the judgement of those who are stakeholders in the issues they portray – people will make sense of it in their own ways according to their own experience, tolerances and responsibilities.

A second limitation is less remediable – we did not interview a corresponding sample of teachers. This is important, since one reading of the student data would suggest that it is the teacher who is often the focus of the breakdown of the schooling contract and the provocation for self-withdrawal. We do not agree with this interpretation of the data – we prefer to assume (on the basis of our research experience elsewhere and our experience in teacher education) that what teachers do and don't do with these young people reflects constraints they themselves live under at least as much as their values. Perhaps it owes something to their perceptions of a breakdown of their own professional contract with schooling. Even so, the absence of teacher data in this study (we were unable to secure appointments with teachers within the timescale) means that we lose the triangulation and the reciprocal voice.

Turning to those who attend our data provides an interesting counterpoint to the voices of self-withdrawers. The low achievers who attend reject the view that teachers are always a problem and are able to see how working with teachers provides a discipline for life after school. The question why they bother is not easy to answer but it does indicate that there is a need to focus on this group if we are to understand how school might be more significant in the lives of all young people. Like the individual teacher we referred to they offer a critique of the nature of the school curriculum but in doing that they do not reject the core subjects. What they want is a vocationally orientated curriculum but one that has clear links with the world of work not one “academicises” the vocational. Our girl informant’s comments on beauty therapy or something similar is representative of this. We identify a problem with simply accepting the voice of students with respect to the nature of a vocational curriculum in that they can only identify things that are within their ken. School’s job is not to constrain student work choice but widen their horizons and in doing this they must set new agenda. Currently the debate in England and Wales focuses on the possibility of curriculum change for the 14 plus age group but it is confused and confusing debate in that the question of radically altering the process of certification has been rejected by central government. Our conclusion must be that central government’s concern for attendance is misplaced since it focuses on punishment not reform. What is needed is more understanding of how students understand the value of school not merely the understanding of school rejecters.

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