

How can schools encourage and support collaboration with SMEs to improve young people's employability skills and transition into work?

Michelle Judkins shares insights from new research

Schools and colleges have the duty to drive forward independent and impartial careers guidance, yet they cannot achieve this alone. While they have the freedom and scope to personalise it to meet the needs of individual young people, with this freedom comes the responsibility of ensuring that they are well informed about roles and jobs available in today's business market, and have access to a breadth of opportunities.

In London, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) represent 99.8 per cent of businesses, while in the South East they represent 99.6 per cent (London Enterprise Panel, 2013). However, often SME partnerships are a missed opportunity when developing careers provision and the opportunities for young people to have a stake in, contribute to and benefit from this sector of the economy could be better.

With this in mind, a team at NFER in partnership with the South East Strategic Leaders, London Councils and the London Enterprise Panel, sought to examine how SMEs and micro-businesses work together with secondary schools and colleges in London and the South East to improve young people's employability skills and successful transition into work.

This is also vital to the continuing economic success of London and the South East – the assumption being that providing suitable learning and training opportunities for young people contributes to economic regeneration and development.

Developing direct relationships between schools, colleges and SMEs, where respect, transparency and mutual benefits are valued, is crucial

'What's in it for me?'

So what are the potential benefits for educators of SME engagement? Geographically speaking, what better resource for schools and colleges than to tap into the local business market? The research clearly indicates that engagement with SMEs helps foster understanding of local business need, which in turn helps inform a more joined-up approach to skills development (and supports a personalised curriculum for specific business sectors).

For educators, it is also another avenue to provide independent, impartial information from individuals not employed by the school. This helps educators deliver a broader offer to young people. Collaboration also helps increase awareness among young people of the role of SMEs in the workplace and provides a more balanced exposure to local corporations. Similarly, a small business inherently lends itself to providing an increased awareness of work tasks through working within a small team.

The pressures and demands of a small business are undeniably explicit. Partnerships (between schools or colleges and small employers) inherently need to be mutually beneficial.

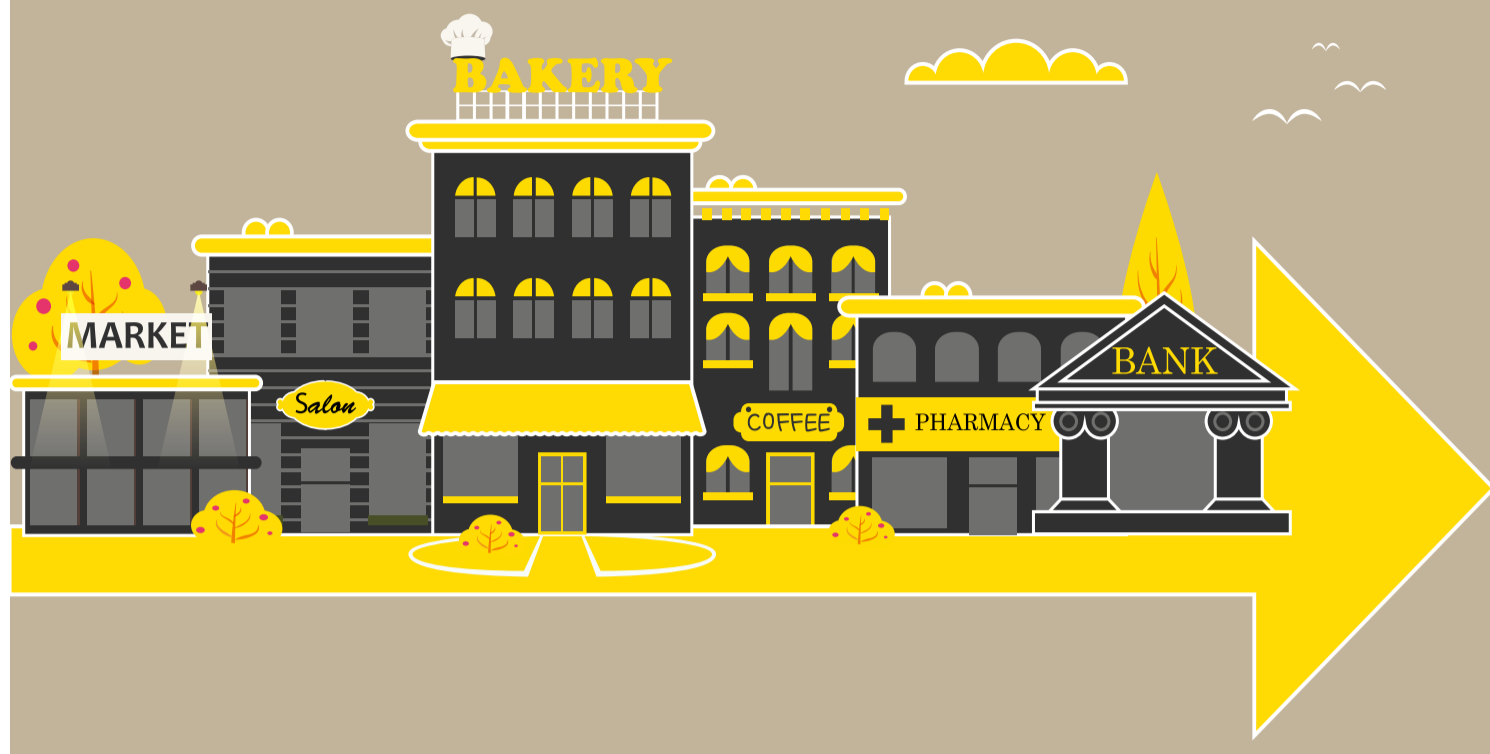
So what about the small business? What's in it for them? Well, it is a good opportunity to influence the curriculum offer, helping educators understand what their business needs and, potentially, to identify potential employees who fit their business needs and support the development of young people in their specific business area (through an Apprenticeship, for example).

Furthermore, there may be an opportunity to promote and advertise businesses, with institutions displaying partners' logos around their buildings. This in turn gives young people a chance to see which businesses are keen to invest in them.

What will facilitate effective engagement?

There is clearly enthusiasm for such collaborative working, despite some of the challenges involved. NFER identified no shortage of support for strong

Engaging with SMEs



employer-educator relationships. Why, then, are SMEs not more involved in careers provision and what is holding back this collaborative power?

Unpicking the drivers and inhibitors through the research helped guide practical ways in which to enhance existing partnerships, as well as actively encourage new ones. Many of the barriers that emerged revolved around a lack of communication – for example, employers were often unaware of named contacts within institutions who they could call to discuss partnerships, or even who to contact once they had recruited an apprentice.

Despite the existence of websites that aim to provide a platform for businesses to engage with schools and colleges (such as inspiringthefuture.org), there was clear evidence that they were generally perceived as being fairly limited in terms of helping initiate and develop relationships.

Rather, the importance of the "sell" to businesses is clear; the more informed and involved employers are, the more they will realise that schools and colleges cannot produce a "work-ready" young person alone, and that their input is crucial to the better preparation of young people to the workplace. A dedicated careers coordinator plays an important role in brokering meaningful long-term connections.

Overall, the main facilitators to effective engagement include:

- A single line of communication (face-to-face where possible) to help SMEs understand the importance of their role, smooth out queries, break-down barriers, and instil confidence in the employer, with the ultimate goal of sustaining relationships.
- In order to assist buy-in from employers, the content of careers information can be discussed together. In addition, providing employers with updates on students' progress on courses, for example, helped maintain communication channels.
- Ensuring flexibility on both sides is important. Additionally understanding the value of any commitment, however small, is critical. Providing case study examples of how employers can engage with educational institutions may help broaden the offer to allow employers to examine various strategies that can fit into their business calendars.

Case study: K&M McLoughlin Decorating

This family-owned painting and decorating company was set up in 1988, and today employs 120 people. In response to a lack of relevant training provision, the company established its own college. Its Apprenticeship programme retains more than 90 per cent of qualified apprentices.

They also work in partnership with a local college to deliver a five-week Pre-Apprenticeship and Employability Programme to improve employability skills and help foster a genuine interest in the construction industry. The programme takes on around 20 individuals every five weeks and gives young people real work experience while instilling a strong work ethic, emphasising punctuality, commitment, team-work etc.

Case study: UTC Reading

Partnerships with local industry are imperative to helping deliver college courses and SMEs play a key role in course delivery. Some sponsor BTEC units and the college aims to match each unit to a business partner. The partner agrees the unit content in an attempt to match their business needs. The partner launches and delivers the unit, supports assessment and can offer mentoring or work experience opportunities. Elsewhere, tutors can collapse the curriculum for a day in order for partner SMEs to deliver specific activities. Also, whole-

school events, where SMEs work with other larger companies, help to deliver aspects of the curriculum.

Conclusion

The research found that effective infrastructure to help guide discussions between educators and businesses could help overcome communication barriers which can result in businesses losing interest and enthusiasm. As a result, the evidence informed a Connect Card (see further information), which acts as a starting point to help bridge the gap between educator and employer, providing a platform for meaningful dialogue which could help lead to effective education-business link activities.

If only one important message is taken away from the research, it is that developing direct relationships

between schools, colleges and SMEs, where respect, transparency and mutual benefits are valued, is crucial. Increased dialogue and open-mindedness on both sides can help ensure that flexible methods of engagement are understood, providing the structure needed to progress and sustain engagement in a meaningful way for all parties.

• Michelle Judkins is an NFER research associate.

Further information

The Connect Card, the research summary and a case study report outlining examples of good educator-employer activities across London and the South East, can be found at www.nfer.ac.uk/employability



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What is the best way to support students who, for none of the obvious reasons, seem to be switching off from school?

Sarah Fleming shares some promising findings from on-going research

‘Prevention is better than cure’ is one of those pieces of received wisdom that many people have trouble translating into everyday life or work. Making an upfront commitment to nip a potential problem in the bud does, after all, require a certain amount of faith (in the intervention) and vision (of the future benefit), not to mention investment – of time, money and resources.

In the school context, prevention is particularly important when dealing with students who are at risk of disengaging, but do not face significant or complex barriers to learning.

NFER evidence shows that this group makes up almost two-thirds of those who go on to become NEET (not in education, employment or training) after leaving compulsory education. These students often fall through the cracks because they do not present obvious home or school-related difficulties.

And the lack of solid evidence about the benefits of specific preventative programmes means schools can be understandably reluctant to redirect resources from more immediate areas of need.

Plugging the gap

There is some light at the end of this tunnel in the shape of emerging evidence from an NFER study, which we first reported on in *SecEd* in February (Seeking a NEET solution, *SecEd* 373, February 27, 2014).

To recap: a team of NFER researchers are following a group of secondary schools across England who are already running programmes to prevent their key stage 4 students from disengaging from learning.

The ultimate aim is to identify practice that appears to be working and carry out further analysis to provide robust evidence that it does work, thereby giving other schools an evidence base to inform their own strategies.

As we go along, our researchers are capturing and sharing the learning from what seems to be working so far, providing best-practice examples that can be replicated. The support strategies vary greatly across schools. One school is providing academic mentoring, another extended work experience, another a programme to support positive behaviour change (see panel below), while students in other schools work towards alternative qualifications that motivate them more.

Key to all the support strategies is identifying the right young people who would benefit, and the reasons why they are at risk (for which NFER has developed a free tool, *Reading the Signs* – see further information). While it is still early days, students are already reporting benefits from the support they are receiving.

Student A's story

Student A attends Rushden Academy, part of a consortium of schools in East Northamptonshire running a programme to help students remain engaged at school. It includes a range of activities including academic mentoring, targeted careers advice and tailored work experience.

Staff identified this very capable student for the programme because they felt she was not reaching her full potential. She was persistently truanting, walking off site and displaying problematic behaviour.

A Common Assessment Framework was put into place for a number of issues and, at one point, the school was considering moving her from mainstream education to work within its Inclusive Learning Unit.

Student A responded well to the mentoring process and genuinely wanted to improve her grades and get back on track. She received intensive mentoring support under the raising the participation age project, built a good relationship with her mentor, and was listened to regarding what would work well for her in lessons and why.

The mentor worked with all subject teachers to ensure Student A was on task and, with intensive (almost daily) support, she began to return to lessons and rekindled her love for learning.

Since that time, Student A has successfully attained a grade C in GCSE maths. She is expecting to achieve at least five A* to C GCSEs including English. However she is struggling still in some subjects, such as French and science, possibly because she missed so much earlier in year 10.

Student A is now happy, focused and on-task, and has decided to stay on at 6th form to study four A levels. She is an accomplished musician and keen historian – achieving one mark off an A grade in a

NEETs: Prevention is better than cure



recent assessment. She has also signed up for her Duke of Edinburgh Bronze as part of the mentoring process and is attending an after-school cookery skills workshop alongside seven other students on the raising of the participation age project. In her spare time she volunteers for a church group and does some one-to-one work with a young girl with cerebral palsy.

This student has really turned her life around, the mentoring took place at the right time for positive intervention strategies to be put into place.

She explained: ‘The mentoring has really helped me and has had a positive impact on my educational needs.’

‘It has been fun getting involved in new projects – for example, last summer I helped out with a transition summer school where I delivered a drama workshop with year 6s. This really helped me become more confident and it was a great compliment when my mentor asked me to help her run this project.’

‘I discovered I was really good at working with younger children who had behavioural problems – I think it may be because I’ve been through similar experiences myself.’

Common threads

Despite the range of different approaches, we are starting to see common threads among these schemes that seem to be contributing to their success. These include:

- Flexibility within programmes ensuring that, as much as is practical, they can be tailored to the needs and interests of the individual young person.
- Developing open and supportive relationships between staff and students. This is particularly relevant for one-to-one support and mentoring.
- Opening up the young people’s horizons on future possibilities, providing them with the knowledge to feel confident in making decisions for their future.
- Ensuring that students do not feel labelled as

A different approach

Kings Lynn Academy has implemented the ‘Do Something Different’ online programme, which was initially developed by psychologists at the University of Hertfordshire. There are a number of variants of the programme; the students do the ‘Teen’ version which is aligned with the academy’s aim of improving health and wellbeing (including self-esteem, mood and anxiety), and increasing attainment.

The programme includes:

- An initial assessment of the young person’s behavioural habits. This informs the selection of a range of ‘Do’ tasks suited to the young person.
- Three ‘Do’ tasks are sent by email or text to the participant about three times a week for six weeks.
- Students develop strategies to help them succeed in the future.

What are ‘Do’ tasks? ‘Do’ tasks are suggested simple actions sent to the students to try for one day (e.g. sitting in a different chair in class or trying not to complain for a day). ‘Do’ tasks help students explore their behaviour, encourage them to try things outside their ‘comfort zone’, and offer them tools to deal with situations in a more positive way.

‘problem kids’ because of receiving additional support.

- Recognising the extra value an external partner brings to schools including expertise, support and training.

Crucially, we have seen how important it is that these preventative programmes have buy-in from all those involved, from senior leaders within schools and other members of staff, to students and parents (who need to understand why their child would benefit from

the additional support). Regular communication is vital for this to happen.

New year, new focus

As the new year ushers in the final phase of this research, we aim to identify which of these programmes are most effective at catching this group of potential NEETs before they disengage – if possible measuring impact with a randomised controlled trial. It might be, though, that the study concludes it is more appropriate to focus on key factors common to successful interventions and that, working with school partners, we can develop and roll-out a support programme combining these elements which can, in turn, be independently evaluated.

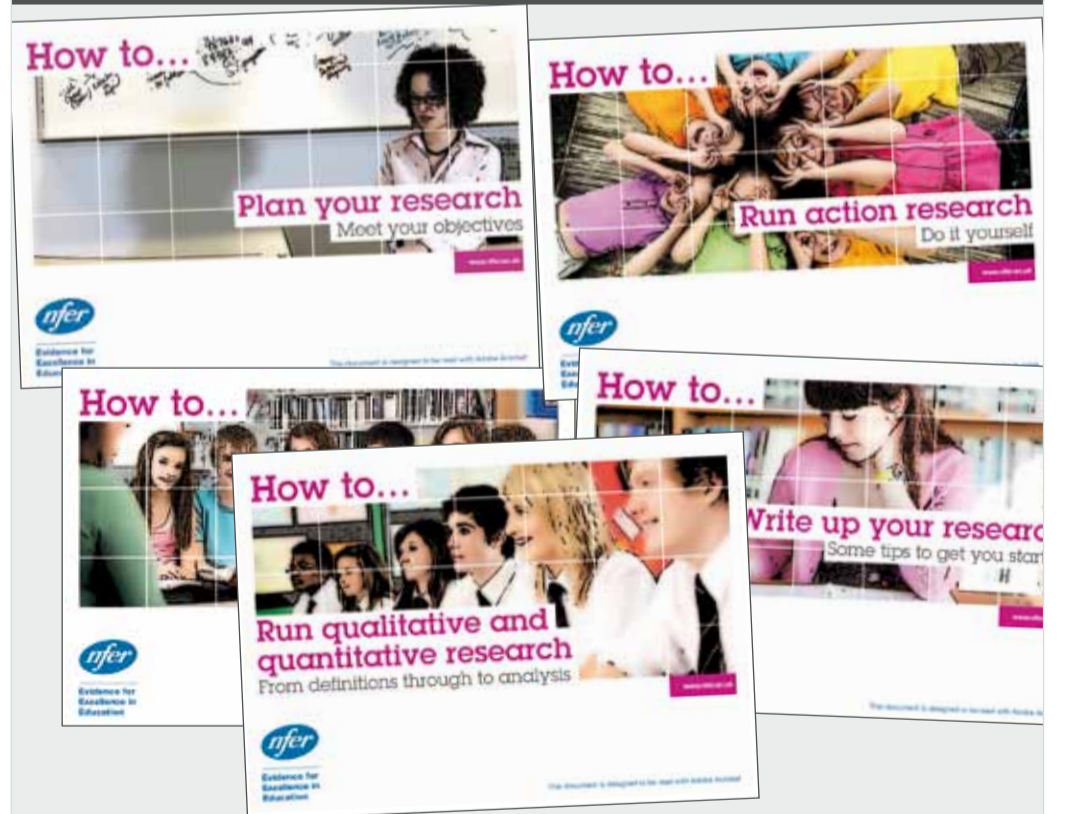
This would provide robust evidence – perhaps the ‘proof’ that schools need – that their faith, vision and investment really can prevent some of their students from joining the thousands whose prospects are defined by that NEET label.

Sarah Fleming is NFER’s media executive and communications lead for the foundation’s work on education to employment.

Further information and resources

- *NEET Prevention: Keeping students engaged at key stage 4: Top tips for senior leaders* – a free guide for senior leaders offering advice on developing a support programme for students in a systematic and structured way: www.nfer.ac.uk/IMP3
- *NEET Prevention: Keeping students engaged at key stage 4: Second case study report* – the full research report providing detailed updates on each of the 10 schools involved in the project’s first year: www.nfer.ac.uk/IMP2
- *Reading the Signs: A discussion aid for identifying the reasons why young people may disengage* – NFER’s discussion aid of indicators to understand the reasons behind students’ behaviour: www.nfer.ac.uk/IND2

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Information – both about national trends and about what is happening in your own school – is a powerful weapon in the fight against bullying. **Dorothy Lepkowska** explains

Tackling bullying: Knowledge is power



Good standards of pupil behaviour and discipline are paramount in every school. A strong ethos of high expectations and hard work, coupled with good conduct and appropriate, consistent behaviour management policies are vital if children are to succeed, and be kept safe and secure.

But how many heads and teachers really know what pupils and their parents feel about issues such as bullying – or the extent to which the problem may exist in their school?

Teachers may be vigilant, but they cannot be around to witness every push or shove, or every incident of name-calling or teasing. At the same time, pupils and parents cannot always be relied upon to report incidents of bullying.

Children themselves can feel embarrassed that they have been picked on, or feel intimidated that the bullying may become worse if they tell someone. Moreover, bullying is not always visible and the perpetrators are often cunning in their methods.

Some schools have used tools such as NFER's Schools Surveys and Themed Surveys, allowing them to delve into the heart of a whole range of issues, such as pupil behaviour, standards of teaching and school-home communication, by presenting pupils and parents with questions on matters that directly concern and affect them.

What the answers to the surveys reveal, through thorough and careful analysis of the results by statisticians at NFER, can help heads and governors to understand the extent and nature of any problems and, in turn, implement effective policies and guidelines to manage them.

Furthermore, the outcomes are shown compared to the rest of the schools in the sample, weighted to be nationally representative, so schools know where they sit alongside other schools.

“Pupils who have fallen prey to bullies were most likely, for example, to mention lies or rumours about them or their appearance and cited these were the main reason they believed they were being bullied”

When David Quick joined Slindon College as headteacher, both he and the governing body wanted to get a clear picture of what parents really thought about the school, and what their expectations were.

His colleague Jenny Davies, the school's registrar, set up a survey using NFER's General Parent Survey. Not only did the staff want to use the results to shape the school's improvement plan, but to give them a measure against which to implement their own interventions.

Based in Arundel, West Sussex, Slindon College is an independent day and boarding school offering specialist learning support for boys aged eight to 18 years addressing a wide range of specific learning difficulties, such as ADHD, dyslexia, and including children on the autistic spectrum. In a setting where behaviour can already be challenging, it was important to have the appropriate policies in place.

The school wanted to get a clear idea of its strengths, and what parents thought should be areas for further development.

“I particularly liked the comparison with other schools. It gave us something to work with straight away,” explained Ms Davies, adding that the filter function on the survey report was particularly useful

in enabling her to investigate the results more deeply using online reporting software.

The school was pleased to see that some results broadly reflected the thoughts of the senior leadership team. There was some concern from staff that behaviour and discipline may have slipped over recent years – a view shared by parents.

Mr Quick used the findings as evidence to demonstrate this, which informed various changes. Parents have already commented on an improvement in behaviour and the situation will be monitored with future parental surveys.

NFER's School Surveys can provide a range of useful information, not least for use during an Ofsted inspection. The findings can give senior leaders an opportunity to address any matters causing concern and to put appropriate measures in place to mitigate any parental and pupil concerns.

In an attempt to create a national picture of the extent and types of bullying going on in our schools, NFER carried out an analysis of the responses to its School Surveys from secondary school parents.

One of the questions examining the issue of whether schools' approaches to anti-bullying were effective showed that 27 per cent strongly agreed that they were, 46 per cent agreed and five per cent disagreed (22 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed, were not aware of the school's policy, or did not feel able to answer the question).

Overall, the findings suggest that it is important for schools to know how parents feel about this issue before an inspection.

Some types of bullying are, of course, more prevalent than others, and have a greater negative impact on children's emotional health and wellbeing.

Pupils who have fallen prey to bullies were most likely, for example, to mention lies or rumours about them or their appearance and cited these were the main reason they believed they were being bullied.

When asked how they had been bullied by people from their own school in the previous 12 months, 28 per cent said they had been called names or had rumours spread about them, while 12 per cent had been physically attacked and 19 per cent had felt left out and excluded from friendship groups. Of those asked, 13 per cent had had property stolen or damaged.

Exclusion from a particular group could have a particularly devastating effect, and NFER analyses show that this type of bullying can be more strongly associated with poor emotional wellbeing than other types, including physical or verbal abuse. This problem was particularly prevalent among girls, who used emotional rather than physical tactics. An important part of a school's anti-bullying policy can be knowing how to support a child when relationships between pupils break down.

For older girls, unwanted sexual contact was found to be the type of bullying most strongly associated with poor emotional wellbeing, although incidents were relatively rare. The most common type of bullying among all age groups was verbal abuse, and this was more strongly linked to poor emotional wellbeing than physical violence. Overall, however, boys were more likely to be bullied than girls.

busy day-to-day business of schools can reduce communication between staff and pupils to little more than the sending home of newsletters. But conducting surveys at intervals can help to keep that dialogue open.

“By offering participation in surveys, schools are effectively telling parents and pupils that their views are important and that the school is prepared to act on those comments and observations.

“We know, for example, that in some secondary schools, they have provided a narrative for school improvement, or acted as a gauge about what parents think about a particular policy change or implementation. To newly arrived heads still finding their feet, or trying to turn around a school in challenging circumstances, having some feedback helps to test the atmosphere in the school on a particular issue at any given time.

“Schools need to be mindful of reviewing their policies on bullying periodically. Anti-bullying week (November 17-21) is a good time to revisit the issue, and to ensure that everything that can be done to tackle this potential problem is being done.”

SecEd

• Dorothy Lepkowska is an education journalist

Further information

- NFER School Surveys: www.nfer.ac.uk/ss9
- The NFER report, *Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones, But Being Left on My Own is Worse: An analysis of reported bullying at school with-in NFER attitude surveys*: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/ASUR01
- Statistics on bullying related to SEN and disabilities are available from www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk/research/key-statistics
- A recent *Research Insights* article, *In the Pursuit of Happiness*, was published in *SecEd* in January 2014 and discusses emotional and school wellbeing. For this and other Research Insights advisory articles, visit www.nfer.ac.uk/schools/seced.cfm

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How can schools engage with research successfully and what makes for an evidence-informed school?

Tami McCrone and Matt Inniss advise

Engaging with research gets you thinking, it challenges you and makes you evaluate carefully your teaching methods and the reasons behind them” (comment from a teacher).

“Evidence-based teaching” – is this simply the latest in a long succession of fads and buzz-words around education policy, or is there much more to it?

While there have been efforts to encourage research engagement in schools and teaching practice before, the current interest is worth investigating.

From Dr Ben Goldacre’s controversial call for Randomised Controlled Trials in education, to the Education Endowment Fund’s effort to find out “what works” using such trials – there’s a burgeoning interest in providing an evidence-base to support the efforts of our teachers.

But perhaps the most interesting development has been from the ground up. Teachers coming together through social media to critically engage in their own professional development. The ever-growing “ResearchEd” conference movement is a tangible result, for instance.

At the NFER, we wanted to explore further what evidence-informed practice really means to teachers today. What better way to do that than to work directly with teachers on a project.

In partnership with United Learning, a group of around 50 schools across both the state academy and independent sectors, we designed and conducted our own investigation into how schools within the group use and create their own research.

Partnership between academics and teachers was key – we wanted the work itself to reflect this wider potential change in attitude and approach, where the dividing lines between practitioners and researchers are reduced. The main purpose of this exploratory research project was to investigate how teachers use evidence in the classroom, and what they feel are the most effective approaches to engaging with research and using it to inform practice.

Engaging in evidence can really help to identify what works and, as one headteacher pointed out, can ‘save time’ because you know what the evidence says

All in the mindset

Teachers and senior leaders interviewed in seven case study United Learning schools believed that one of the main potential benefits of engaging in research evidence was improved pupil achievement and attitude. Additionally, using research evidence was perceived to:

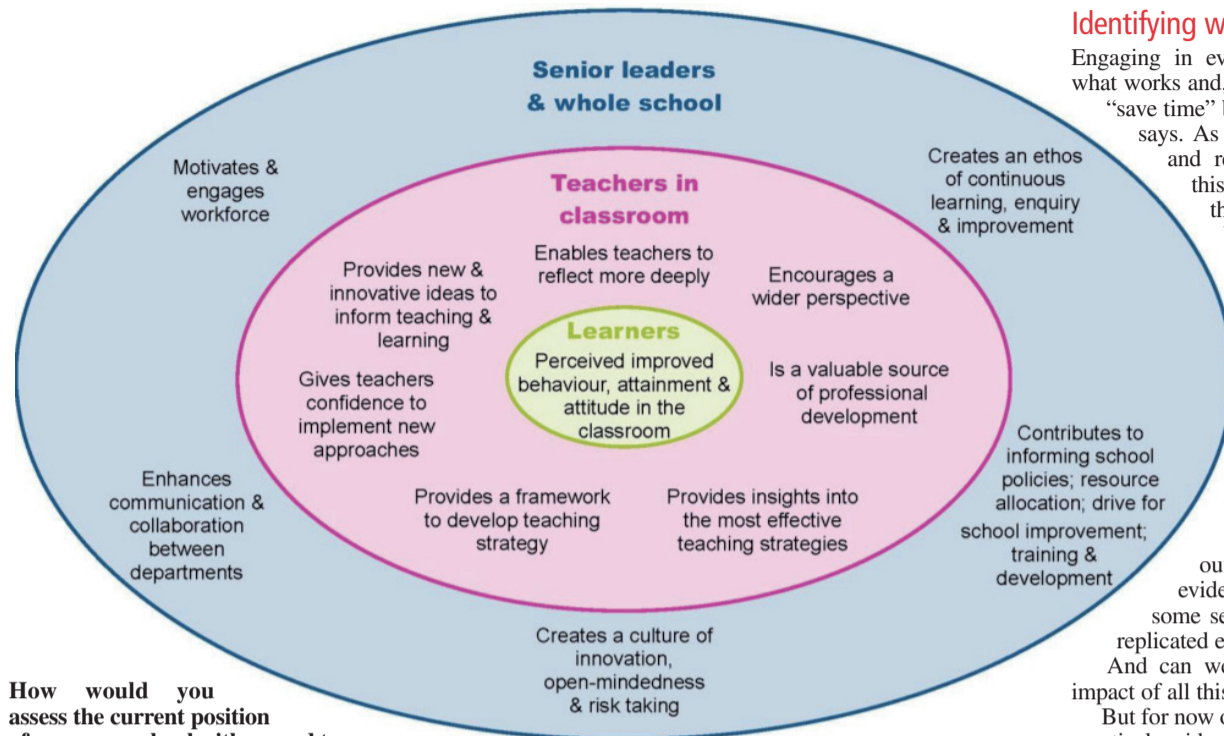
- Encourage teachers to reflect more deeply on their teaching practice.
- Provide new and innovative ideas to inform teaching and learning.
- Encourage teachers to look beyond their school and gain a wider perspective.
- Provide a valuable source of CPD.
- Provide insights into the most effective teaching strategies.
- Give teachers confidence to implement new approaches.
- Contribute to improved behaviour, attainment and attitude in the classroom.

Senior leaders highlighted some whole-school benefits they believed engagement in evidence brings – for example, to resource allocation decisions, the introduction and justification of school policies, the drive for whole-school improvement, and staff training and development. The illustration on this page provides an overview of these perceived benefits.

Cultural evolution

So, what to do next to create more evidence engagement in your school? Here are some questions:

Research engagement



How would you assess the current position of your own school with regard to the use of evidence and research to inform your practice?

- How many teachers or other members of staff are using research in some way to improve their practice?
- How many staff members are conducting or accessing external research? What support do they receive?
- What part does evidence play in your decision-making process on whole-school teaching and learning?
- What opportunities are there for your staff to discuss evidence?

How do we make evidence-informed practice a priority?

- What incentives do you think your staff needs to engage with or conduct their own research?
- What are the best ways to create the right environment and the time and space to do this?
- Who should lead on the use of evidence within your school? A senior leadership team member? A “knowledge champion”? Individual heads of subject or heads of department? How would their role work?
- What structures and support do you need to put in place to make engaging with evidence a priority?

How do we translate research resources into better teaching and learning in class?

- Research priorities: what are the big research questions we still need to know more about to really understand how children learn?
- What level of expertise do individual teachers require in order to make good practical use of (and to challenge or conduct) research? Do they need access to external research organisations/universities?
- How do we measure the effectiveness of research-based approaches in developing teaching and learning?
- How can we encourage action research findings to be shared, both within and between schools? How do we make best use of external research evidence? Does such evidence need to be routinely accompanied by practical interpretation for the classroom?
- Whose job is it to translate “research jargon” into everyday language?

Getting started

Ensuring your school is engaged in research evidence is challenging. The following menu of potential “enablers” or building blocks for developing a research-engaged school culture is by no means exhaustive, but is based on the experiences of the case study schools and may provide some tips to get you started.

- School-based funding for teachers’ own action research projects.
- Subscription to subject association journals as a source of context-specific research
- Appointing a “knowledge champion”, who takes the lead on finding and disseminating relevant evidence/material or co-ordinating action research.
- Providing access to academic library catalogues or online research resources.
- Modelling research – providing examples of how new ideas could be implemented in practice. This could include lesson plans, schemes of work or sourcing case studies/filmed content from other schools.
- Moving to a model of Joint Practice Development

Identifying what works

Engaging in evidence can really help to identify what works and, as one headteacher pointed out, can “save time” because you know what the evidence says. As for the future, a model of teachers and researchers working together (as in this piece of research) to identify where the research needs to be done is, we believe, the way forward.

This research project was just the beginning; exploring the current state of play – how teachers make use of research, what are the perceived benefits and, most crucially, what are the most important enablers that either allow research-engaged schools to flourish, or the barriers that can stop it from getting off the ground.

There is much more to find out. If we understand what makes evidence-informed schools successful in some settings, how can this be successfully replicated elsewhere in different ones? And can we measure, with greater rigour, the impact of all this effort on pupils and students?

But for now our full report, and the accompanying practical guide for establishing your own research-engaged culture, will hopefully provide an effective starting point for those senior and middle leaders looking to promote this agenda in their own schools. If you want to get more involved in producing or interpreting evidence, please do get in touch. [SecEd](#)

Tami McCrone is research director in NFER’s Impact Team and Matt Inniss is the subject leader for history and an economics teacher at Paddington Academy in Westminster. Email enquiries@nfer.ac.uk

Further information

- *Creating a Research-engaged School: A guide for senior leaders:* www.nfer.ac.uk/IM2
- *Teachers’ Use of Research Evidence: A case study of United Learning schools:* www.nfer.ac.uk/IM1

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Confused by the conflicting messages we receive about both the state and the purpose of our education system? Perhaps it is time to go back to first principles to find some clarity, argues

Dr Newman Burdett

The English education system is really rather good overall, that is the suggestion from the recently published Pearson report, *The Learning Curve*.

But this is in contrast to the 2012 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) results which, some claimed, showed it was rather poor, and again in contrast, I have a cutting above my desk from the 2009 PISA results that proclaims (from almost identical results) that England “is among the elite”.

So which view of the evidence is correct? More importantly, does our international ranking really matter? Do Finnish teachers feel dismayed that their results in the PISA tests mean they are slipping down the rankings? Or, like Ireland losing the Eurovision, are they secretly thinking “thank God for that – now we might just be left alone to get on with it”?

International surveys such as PISA, TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) are important and, as I and some of my colleagues have asserted several times, provide a huge amount of useful information about our education system beyond some ill-defined “rank”.

And I believe there is some justification in the claims that in terms of performance we are “stagnating”. It is a stagnation that has been going on for decades and under many watches. But it is a stagnation of standards as measured by tests such as this, not a stagnation of education practice – a quick hit of *Educating Essex*, or wandering into any good classroom, contrasts strikingly with education from 20 or 50 years ago.

“This may sound like a contradiction – our practice is improving but our standards are not – so is this possible? The answer probably lies in the measures that we are using to judge the system”

This may sound like a contradiction – our practice is improving but our standards are not – so is this possible? The answer probably lies in the measures that we are using to judge the system.

To find better measures, we have to understand what it is we are trying to achieve with our education system – and herein I find England’s education system stands out (except maybe from the US) in that we do not seem to have an agreed idea of what education is for, other than it is a “good thing” and “important for the economy”.

Other education systems often seem to have a more clearly articulated sense of the purpose of their schooling – often with national and cross-party support.

This then makes it straightforward to align new interventions or developments to the agreed purpose. In England, the education system is something that has evolved and accumulated purposes, and the only political consensus is that it makes a great football.

So what is the purpose of our education system? This is a very complex question – and one that has diverse answers because the needs of different groups within the system are, well, very different. High-fliers with university in their sights have very different needs, for example, from the White working-class boys at risk of dropping out.

We need to get much better at agreeing what is important, then asking the right questions and



using the right measures to evaluate whether we are achieving this. Then we might go some way to answering the real question – “are we happy with our education system and what do we need to do to keep improving it?” – and getting an answer that is better than “we’re not the same as Korea”.

The foundations of success

The first and primary purpose of education must be to ensure that all children gain early on basic numeracy and literacy skills, because without these skills then nothing further can be achieved.

This is the core of the new accountability system in our primary schools – progress measures from a baseline in early literacy and numeracy to an end point of the key stage 2 tests in reading and mathematics.

One of the “lessons learned” from *The Learning Curve* is that: “Developing countries must teach basic skills more effectively before they start to consider the wider skills agenda. There is little point in investing in pedagogies and technologies to foster 21st century skills, when the basics of numeracy and literacy aren’t in place.”

This is not only true for developing countries, this applies equally to England, where we know from the international survey data (the International Survey of Adult Skills – PIACC) that a worrying number of people lack these basic skills.

The first purpose of education (both in importance and chronologically) must be to ensure that every child is given the basic foundations on which they can build the rest of their learning. All learners need a solid grounding in literacy and numeracy, as well as the ability to apply their understanding in new contexts, and an interest and engagement that mean they want to go on and learn more.

Beyond the 3Rs

“Libraries gave us power, then work came and made us free” (*A Design for Life*, Manic Street Preachers 1996).

Any school knows that what they do is about much more than simply imparting knowledge on a core set of subjects; it is also about creating future citizens with a broad and life-ready toolkit of skills and attitudes. “Twenty first century skills” is a much abused phrase, and most of the skills lumped into this catch-all are things that schools have been developing in their students for many decades.

If the Rugby school of *Tom Brown’s School Days* had had a mission statement back in the 1850s, I am sure it would have listed at least half of these so-called 21st century skills, skills such as problem-solving, communication, creativity – these things have long been woven into the very fabric of learning (with the possible new-fangled exceptions of digital literacy and global citizenship).

So one of the central purposes of education must be about making sure that students have the emotional intelligence, the team-working and communication skills, the problem-solving, creativity and innovation to make their own success in the world. You can argue this from any political or theoretical viewpoint, but the answer will always be that learners need these skills to succeed, to contribute to the economy and to make the world a better place.

Beyond skills – the right knowledge

Putting aside the political tones of the arguments for and against powerful knowledge, there is a fundamental truth that some kinds of knowledge are necessary and that we all need to have certain facts at our fingertips – at the most basic level, number facts, so we can check our change at the supermarket.

But I believe that this “powerful knowledge” will diverge for different people; we cannot all be polymaths – we need to make sure the students learn

the knowledge that will be useful for them and have it made relevant to them.

There is no point trying to teach a student abstract redox reactions if they are struggling with chemistry, but it is useful to teach a student who is studying to be a mechanic why you should not use brass bolts on steel.

What is important is that we make sure knowledge is accompanied by understanding – learning is about making a working, conceptual framework so that we can use that powerful knowledge in different contexts. Otherwise it is just a collection of disjointed facts that will quickly be forgotten once the pressure of an exam is over.

So what is the purpose of education?

If England sets out to agree a “purpose” for our education system, at a national level, it may be a tortuous path towards achieving agreement. However, I feel the following basic aims would be at its core:

- To give all learners the basic skills to access and drive their own education.
- To develop the softer, non-subject life skills needed to succeed.
- To impart powerful subject knowledge (and by this we mean the facts, concepts and procedural knowledge needed to continue to take that subject further and progress in it).

By agreeing a shared purpose, we would know what it is we would want to be measured against, and what success would look like. We would know whether to place greater weight on the results of surveys such as PISA focusing on core skills, or *The Learning Curve* focusing on a much broader set of measures.

It would give us a shared understanding of what is valued, where our efforts should be focused, and whether we are making progress or not. **SecEd**

• Dr Newman Burdett is head of the Centre for International Comparison at NFER. Part of this article was first published on the NFER Blog at www.thenferblog.org

International surveys – further reading

- PIACC: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/IACZ01
- PIRLS: www.nfer.ac.uk/research/projects/progress-in-reading-literacy-study-pirls/
- PISA: www.nfer.ac.uk/PISA/
- TIMSS: www.nfer.ac.uk/research/projects/trends-in-international-mathematics-and-science-study-timss/



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Getting careers right

Tami McCrone takes a look at how a new partnership is giving schools clear, practical support to help improve their careers advice services

Young people are more in need of effective careers education, information, advice and guidance (CEIAG) than ever before. The world of work is increasingly complex and young people have to make important decisions early in their secondary education. It is vital that they are equipped, through careers education (and later through careers guidance) to take on these challenges.

How to provide effective CEIAG is challenging. It is with this in mind that NFER has collaborated with ASCL, ATL and the 157 Group of colleges to develop some clear, practical, evidence-based advice in the shape of a free-to-download Careers Brief.

A brief history

Our four organisations came to this project from a shared feeling that practical support for schools and colleges – rooted in evidence and developed by people that understand how schools and colleges work – is the best way to help senior leaders (including governors) to plan and progress their programme of careers guidance.

Anyone who works with young people knows that they need to be encouraged to engage proactively in decisions about their education pathways and their journey to a career. To do this, they need the support of their school (and college), their parents, careers professionals, the local community, and employers.

Careers Guidance and Inspiration in Schools, statutory guidance published by the Department for Education (DfE) last month, states that: “Schools should help every pupil develop high aspirations and consider a broad and ambitious range of careers. Inspiring every pupil through more real-life contacts with the world of work can help them understand where different choices can take them in the future.”

We felt that schools and colleges would value practical support in order to meet the statutory duty on careers guidance and we wanted to provide some clarity about what effective CEIAG looks like.

Our shared view is that it will actively encourage and inspire young people to take ownership of their career plans and to consider all options, so that they are able to select the best way forward for their interests, motivations, learning styles, abilities and aspirations.

We also believe that careers should be actively led by a member of the senior leadership team and provide transparent, impartial and accessible information on:

- The resources allocated to, and the content and timing of, CEIAG delivered to young people.
- Local (and where appropriate national) education pathways and labour market opportunities for young people aged 14, 16 and post-18.
- Expectations of collaborative partners, including employers, parents, other educational or training providers and careers professionals.
- The development of employability skills.

Effective CEIAG must also support teachers to actively consider links between their subjects and future careers, and to embed careers information into lessons and subjects, actively consult with young people, parents and staff on provision to inform continuing improvement, and ensure that provision meets the quality that a dedicated CEIAG quality award – nationally validated by the Quality in Careers Standards – can bring.

The importance of ‘buy-in’

A further crucial message is the need for widespread understanding, led by senior leaders, that accepts that CEIAG is more challenging and more important for future economic prosperity than previously thought – as well as a need for widespread agreement of the principles of effective CEIAG.

We believe that effective CEIAG, provided with extensive collaboration that always puts the interests of the young person first, will achieve the following outcomes. On an intermediate level, schools and colleges are more empowered to:

- Deliver effective CEIAG.
 - Monitor and evaluate their CEIAG.
 - Engage with labour market information and the structure of the local economy.
 - Engage with local employers.
 - Better inform parents to guide their children.
- Meanwhile, long-term careers outcomes include the following:
- Young people proactive in taking charge of their futures.
 - Young people’s increased engagement, attendance and attainment.
 - Young people making more informed decisions.
 - Young people more ready for the world of work.
 - More young people appropriately engaged in education, employment or training.
 - An increase in the number of young people achieving wellbeing.
 - A more widespread understanding of lifelong learning.
 - An increase in the number of young people confident and resilient to cope with change.
 - More staff across education aware of their influence on young people.
 - Careers guidance embedded across the curriculum.
 - Employers proactively engaged in the world of education.

How can the Careers Brief help you?

After providing clarity about what effective CEIAG looks like and outlining the outcomes that we are trying to achieve, our Careers Brief outlines key points from the Ofsted framework, such as what inspectors should consider when judging the quality of leadership in, and management of, an institution.

For example, inspectors will consider the extent to which timely information, advice and guidance provides pupils with a good understanding of the full range of options available to assist them to make informed decisions about their next steps in training, education or employment.

The Brief also highlights the key elements of the recent DfE statutory guidance. By law schools have a legal duty to secure independent careers guidance for pupils in years 8 to 13. This must include information on the range of education or training options including Apprenticeships and other vocational pathways, be presented in an impartial manner, and promote the best interests of students.

To gain an overall picture of your institution’s current position and to identify areas for further development, we have included an audit of existing CEIAG in the Brief.

In many institutions there are a number of standalone careers-related activities taking place, but because they are not centrally coordinated, many are not recognised or are duplicated by different members of staff.

A strategic, coordinated, whole-institution approach is required to maximise impact on young people and outcomes. The audit is separated into four categories: strategic, careers education, careers information, advice and guidance, and employer engagement. Each one has suggested activities and you can record the stage you are at (see chart, below).

Additionally, the Brief provides some useful information sources, links and resources and some pointers on how to evaluate and review progress.

It is a good idea to quality-assure your process by self-assessment or by devising formal or informal research alongside your implementation plan.

Investing in, and embedding, a cycle of review and revision of CEIAG will enable progression from the planning stage to impact on young people in a

Inspectors will consider the extent to which timely information, advice and guidance provides pupils with a good understanding of the full range of options available to assist them to make informed decisions

systematic way. You might consider a system such as the Matrix quality standard or devise your own method of self-assessment.

The Brief provides some suggestions for establishing the focus of your research and how to carry it out and provides some links to further NFER resources to help you gather and collate data on the impact your careers guidance is having on your young people.

• Tami McCrone is a research director with NFER.

Further information

- Download the Careers Brief, entitled *Careers Engagement: A good practice brief for leaders of schools and colleges*, free of charge at www.nfer.ac.uk/as2a, where you will also find a Word version of the audit tool. Email your feedback to t.mccrone@nfer.ac.uk
- For DfE statutory guidance, *Careers Guidance and Inspiration in Schools*, visit <http://bit.ly/1f7I2WR>

School or college CEIAG audit

Strategic	Not yet	Planned	Actioned	Impact
The organisation has a member of the leadership team with responsibility for and an understanding of CEIAG. ³				
The organisation has a member of staff responsible for coordinating CEIAG through phases including transition between key stages.				
The organisation has a CEIAG policy that has been shared among staff and parents.				
An annual CEIAG plan is developed each year and is included or linked to the whole-school or college development or improvement plan (through the leadership and management section).				
The organisation has achieved (or at minimum is working towards) accreditation of its provision of CEIAG using a dedicated CEIAG quality award that has gained national validation under the Quality in Careers Standard (QiCS). ⁴ (QiCS-Guide-JANUARY-2014-revision)				
The organisation regularly monitors, reviews and evaluates its CEIAG strategy and provision.				
The organisation gathers its own destinations data and evaluates its progression data against national data to identify the impact of its careers plan and areas for improvement.				
A member of the governing body is a local employer.				

Careers education	Not yet	Planned	Actioned	Impact
All students are provided with the underpinning careers education (and work-related learning) that is planned and delivered in line with accepted best national practice. ⁵				
Curriculum time is allocated for the teaching of careers education, preferably from year 7 (but definitely from year 8).				
Students are taught how to access, interpret and use labour market information to help them make informed career choices.				
Careers education is delivered as a cross-curricular theme and embedded into all subject areas across education phases and transition between key stages.				
Students learn about careers and the world of work and are able to match their skills, interests, learning styles and values to requirements and realistic opportunities in learning and work.				
On leaving the institution all students have a CV, personal statement and record of all their academic and extra-curricular achievements. ⁶				
Students have access to career resources and drop-in careers sessions, and there is a careers section on the school’s or college’s website.				
Parents are made aware of the careers education programme from year 7.				

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A new research project is investigating what interventions are effective when trying to prevent young people from becoming NEETs. **Clare O'Beirne** and **Eleanor Stevens** explain

Seeking a NEET solution



It has been well-documented that the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) is considerable. According to the Office for National Statistics, between July and September 2013, 1.07 million young people aged 16 to 24 were NEET, and this age group has by far the highest rate of unemployment.

This is a complicated and heterogeneous group of young people with a whole range of characteristics, needs, attributes and ambitions. We know from the research that the majority of young people who are NEET do not face multiple or complex barriers to engagement (such as being a teenage mum or having social care involvement) and could be prevented from falling into this group if they were targeted with the right intervention early on. Yet re-engagement activities in many schools tend to focus on the students with more obvious "issues".

One of the reasons for this could be the paucity of reliable information about which interventions are most effective at re-engaging young people who fall into the "in-between" category. So how do you engage these in-betweeners?

Our study

Current research by NFER is examining the impact of school-based programmes that support this group of students to stay engaged in learning. This longitudinal project is looking at 10 support programmes (including alternative curriculum provision) where there is at least anecdotal evidence that they are successful in keeping young people on track in key stage 4, and helping them to make positive transitions afterwards.

We are tracking young people involved in these programmes through to the end of year 11 using indicators of engagement and attainment from our specially devised checklist (see panel, Reading the signs) to monitor progress. Where possible, we are quantifying the impact of each support programme, identifying the features that would facilitate replication, and estimating the cost of implementation.

Last term, our research team carried out baseline visits to nine of the case study schools to gain an overview of the work they are doing in this area. We held in-depth interviews with teaching staff, senior leaders, careers staff and delivery partners, and interviewed groups of year 10 students involved in the interventions, who were asked to complete a short survey exploring their views about education, themselves, and their future plans.

Our first published report from this work describes the case-study schools' support programmes, including details of how they are being run, the characteristics of participating students and how they are selected, and the perceived benefits and challenges of the support approaches. The report is freely downloadable (see further information).

Tailored support

Schools involved in our research are using a range of provision and approaches to encourage student engagement. These broadly fit into the categories illustrated in the graphic below.



Employer or business-focused support

- Extended employer work experience – students spend two days a week on a work placement, two days in schools and one day off-site working towards various vocational qualifications.
- Enterprise and business qualification – students set

up and run a small business as part of the key stage 4 curriculum.

- BT mentoring programme – students receive six one-to-one mentoring sessions from BT staff over the course of a year.
- Social enterprise qualification – students set up and run a business (social enterprise) to generate funds to improve a local issue or need.

Pastoral and/or academic-focused support:

- City Year – one-to-one academic mentoring in class to improve selected students' engagement in learning, achievement and aspirations.
- Academic tutoring – academic English and maths tutoring to support Pupil Premium students who are underachieving.
- "Do Something Different" – a four to six week programme to encourage students to develop new behaviours to cope.

Alternative curriculum or pedagogy:

- An NVQ Level 2 beauty course resulting in a vocational qualification. It is delivered in-school by an adult training college.
- Project-based learning for all students in key stages 3 and 4. The school uses extended projects in key stage 3, and elements of project-based learning in key stage 4, along with other pedagogic approaches.

Package of support

- Raising the participation age project targeting careers guidance and work experience opportunities, academic mentoring, and a team enterprise activity at small groups of underachieving students.

Identifying the students

Schools have taken account of a range of factors in selecting students for intervention support. Concerns about academic progress are, unsurprisingly, prominent in these decisions: underachievement, poor attendance and poor behaviour in school are all important indicators.

The involvement of pastoral staff in these decisions ensures that concerns about a young person's social and emotional wellbeing can also be addressed by, for example, offering one-to-one mentoring or supported team activities to help students with poor social skills or who lack confidence.

Emerging analysis of the school support programmes suggests that, for at least some of the young people involved, exposure to more innovative approaches to teaching and learning, opportunities to engage with employers, different learning environments, or receiving mentoring, helps them to understand the relevance of education to their own lives and to identify possible future pathways.

It seems clear, when talking to these young people, that while they are often quite able and interested in learning, they may not enjoy how or what they learn.

What's next?

In subsequent stages of the research we will monitor students' progress and schools' experiences of delivering their support programmes, and use our findings to

Reading the signs

The NFER recently carried out research to establish a comprehensive checklist of indicators to help educational practitioners understand the reasons why young people may be at risk of disengaging.

Schools can refer to NFER's checklist and use a related discussion aid with young people at risk to understand better the reasons for disengagement and "profile" the characteristics of students about whom they have concerns. They can then use these insights to select the most appropriate support. These resources are available free of charge at www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/INDS02

devise "what works" messages for schools. The impact of each support programme will be quantified in terms of students' engagement and progress at school, which will be measured using student tracking data gathered by participating schools.

This will include data on attendance, attainment, effort and progress towards predicted GCSE grades. We are also asking students to complete the attitudes survey at two further points during the evaluation to monitor changes over time.

The research will help us to identify promising support strategies that will be considered for subsequent quantitative evaluation.

Become a project partner

Over the coming months we will be creating opportunities for our case study schools to share their experiences with other schools interested in learning about, or planning to introduce, similar support programmes.

Preparations are underway for an event this summer where partner schools will be able to learn from case study schools and make links to help facilitate

the implementation of their own support programmes. We have a number of partner schools on board already but are keen to hear from other interested schools. If you would like to find out more, get in touch at learnerengagement@nfer.ac.uk

SecEd

• Clare O'Beirne is a research manager and Eleanor Stevens a researcher in the Centre for Evaluations and Consultancy at the NFER.

Further information

The baseline report which outlines the support programmes being delivered by schools is available on the project page at www.nfer.ac.uk/psaa

Further reading

- You can download two relevant reports from the NFER research programme From Education to Employment:
- *Approaches to Supporting Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training: A Review* (2012): www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/RSRN01
 - *Indicators to Identify the Disengaged* (2013): www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/INDS01

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