Working with Disaffected Students

Why students lose interest in school and what we can do about it

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Kathryn A. Riley and Elle Rustique-Forrester, with Mary Fuller, David Rowles, Ron Letch and James Docking
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Professor Kathryn Riley, an international education consultant and Visiting Professor at The Institute of Education, London, led the World Bank’s Effective Schools and Teachers Thematic Group from 1999-2001. Kathryn has been in education for many years, beginning as a volunteer teacher in Asmara Teacher Training Institute, Eritrea and then teaching in inner city schools in London, before holding senior academic positions at the University of Birmingham (at the Institute of Local Government Studies) and the University of Surrey Roehampton (where she was Director of the Centre for Educational Management). She has also been an elected councillor and senior officer in local government. She is particularly interested in how educational change takes place and the ways in which parents, communities, teachers and pupils can be brought into the change process. Current projects include, ‘What Does it Take to be a Teacher in the 21st century?’ Her publications are extensive and include the acclaimed, ‘Whose School is it Anyway?’ (Falmer Press, 1998); an extensive international reader, ‘Leadership for Change and School Reform’ (with Karen Seashore, Routledge Falmer, 2000); ‘Leadership, learning and systemic reform’ (Journal of Education Change, Volume 1).

Ellalinda Rustique-Forrester, was the lead research officer at the Centre for Educational Management on the project, ‘Bringing Young People Back into the Frame’. Before coming to the UK, she taught in schools in New York City and was research associate for the US National Commission for Teaching and America’s Future, at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York. She has particular expertise in teacher policy has recently completed an extensive review for the Institute of Public Policy Research on Teacher Supply, Learning from the USA.
Professor Mary Fuller, Department of Professional Education, Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education has been involved in research in schools and with adolescents since 1968. The span of her work has been considerable and includes pioneering work on race, gender and class issues in schools and on school culture. Mary has particular expertise in the field of continuing professional development of teachers.

David Rowles has a wide experience in education as a teacher of many years standing, Senior Inspector for Schools in the London Borough of Merton and Deputy Director of the Centre for Educational Management (where he was a Principal Researcher). His main areas of work have been on the implications of Ofsted inspections, the role of school governors and LEA reviews. David has considerable expertise in training, consultancy and evaluation.

Ron Letch started his career as a teacher in Essex. He then moved into teacher training as a senior lecturer in Education in Whitelands College. He went on to become a senior inspector for Surrey County and then chief inspector in the London Borough of Hounslow where he eventually became Deputy Director of Education for Hounslow. He was a Research Associate with the Centre for Educational Management where he led a number of projects.

Dr James Docking was Senior Research Officer at the Centre for Educational Management. He was formerly Head of the Education Department at Whitelands College and Chairman of the School of Education. Jim has published widely on managing behaviour in school, alienation in school, schools and parents, exclusion from school, special educational needs policy, and national education policy. In 2000 he edited New Labour’s Policies for Schools: Raising the Standards (David Fulton).
This book is about pupil disaffection. It tackles some of the thorny issues which policy-makers and practitioners are grappling with in many countries and contexts. Over recent years, education has become a political priority for many governments. Governments of different persuasions, including the UK government, have sought to deal with the issues of underachievement and failure. But if education is a political priority, why aren't school days 'the best days of your life'? Why are so many students – and their teachers – unhappy with their lot?

Fig. 1. I'm sad
Working with Disaffected Students

By and large, most children start school at five, or thereabouts, with enthusiasm and curiosity. By and large, most parents want the best for their children. By and large, most teachers enter the teaching profession because they are motivated by enthusiasm for their subject, or by a commitment to support children's learning. By and large, those teachers who take the route to headship do so, not for the easy life, but because they want to make a difference to young people's lives. For many teachers and their pupils, education is a rewarding experience. But what happens over the years to lead to disaffection in a sizeable minority? Why does the partnership between schools and families succeed for some, but fall apart for others? Why do some young people reject school and become excluded from learning? What forces the different 'camps' into blame mode?

Teacher/headteachers: *If only s/he (the recalcitrant pupil) would come to school more regularly.*

Parents: *If only the teachers would listen.*

Pupils: *If only the lessons weren't so boring.*

International studies have demonstrated that education attainment at 16 is the most important predictor of future participation in learning, and of labour-market opportunities. Young people with no qualifications are between two and three times more likely to be unemployed as their peers, and to be excluded from society. They become disenfranchised by their lack of educational opportunities.

This book is more than another tale of pupil disengagement. By talking to parents, pupils and teachers we have some answers to the questions:

- What can be done to realize the high expectations which are shared by parents, pupils and teachers alike when children first embark on the early years of their schooling?
- What can be done to make a difference?

Many adults and young people contributed their time, energy and thought to the challenging issues which are at the heart of this book. The book is based on an extended study of student disaffection carried out as a part-
nership between the authors, Lancashire County Council and Lancashire's two Training and Enterprise Councils. We have learned much through undertaking our work in Lancashire and I would like to thank all concerned for their contributions to the project. From the research team's point of view, the study has been a team effort but I would particularly like to thank Elle Rustique-Forrester for her contribution as lead researcher, Mary Fuller for helping set the project in train, Ian Monk and Belinda Stott for their enthusiastic back-up and David Rowles, Ron Letch and Jim Docking for their contributions to the fieldwork and analysis. Most of all, I would like to thank the young people we worked with, their parents and teachers.

This book is not about blame and punishment, but about analysis and solutions. I hope that the findings will contribute to making schools happier and more productive places to be – for teachers and pupils alike.

*Kathryn A. Riley, May 2002*