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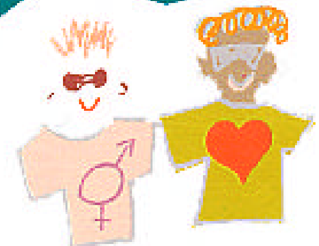
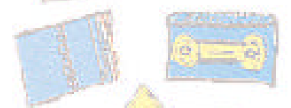

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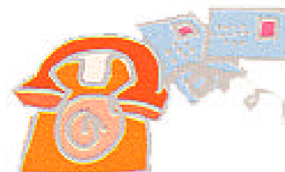
'Disaffected' Youth: background research, political recognition and policy development



'Disaffected' Youth: background research, political recognition and policy development

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'Disaffected' Youth: background research, political recognition and policy development

In May 1994 David Hunt, a former Secretary of State for Employment, said on the radio that there were only *144* young people aged 16 and 17 throughout England and Wales who were not in education, training or employment. The following day, Norman Fowler, another former Secretary of State for Employment, conceded in a newspaper that perhaps 76,000 young people aged 16 and 17 had slipped through the training and benefits net. It was a watershed in political acknowledgement that significant numbers of young people in the first two years after leaving school had become 'disaffected', disconnected and disappeared. Consistent denial that any more than a residual group was outside of education, training and employment evaporated; the government finally conceded that 'disaffection' was a significant, and essential, public policy challenge.

How can the two such disparate figures cited above be reconciled? Hunt's assertion was *not* fiction, but it was a highly selective interpretation of available statistics. Since 1988, young people aged 16 and 17 have - with few exceptions - not been eligible for social security benefits, on the grounds that they should not have the 'option' of unemployment. The withdrawal of that entitlement was 'compensated' by the *youth training guarantee*: young people in this age band who did not stay on in education and failed to find employment would be guaranteed a place on the Youth Training Scheme within eight weeks of them presenting themselves to the Careers Service. Those in special circumstances would, in the interim, be eligible for Bridging Allowances and, in some cases, for Severe Hardship Payments; a few (such as young mothers) would still be able to access Income Support. The official statistics relating to this age group therefore comprised those in receipt of these benefits and those within the 'youth training guarantee group', namely those awaiting a training place. All other young people were *presumed* to be gainfully occupied in education, training or work. Hunt's figure was drawn from that very residual minority who were still waiting for a training place *beyond* the permissible eight weeks waiting time: a tiny group which Training and Enterprise Councils had been encouraged by government to minimise, alongside confidential careers service memoranda indicating various criteria by which young people not in education, training or employment might be *legitimately* removed from the youth training guarantee group.

Fowler's figure is more perplexing, but it was almost certainly drawn from International Labour Organisation data provided by the Unemployment Unit, which considered the cohort population and deducted those recorded as being in education, training or work. This suggested a figure far in excess of those officially registered as outside education, training or employment and was reasonably compatible with the assertions routinely made at the time by organisations working with young people in these circumstances. Indeed, *those* estimates put the figure closer to 100,000, although they acknowledged that perhaps one-third were being supported financially by their families. The others, however, were in effect destitute - with no visible means of support. Nonetheless, the government persisted with presenting the official 'unemployment' figures based on the claimant count, plus - for 16/17 year olds - the YT guarantee group. (Recent changes in the collection of overall unemployment figures, after 31 changes since 1979 of which all but one *reduced* the count, mean that contemporary statistics are based on ILO data, which are now accepted as being more reliable and less prone to political manipulation.)

The research work which first highlighted the prevalence of 'status zer0' (young people not in education, training or employment) had taken place during the summer of 1993 (Istance et al 1994). It had sought to establish reliable quantitative estimates of the numbers in 'status zer0' both at any one time and over time, and to secure some illumination, through qualitative

interviews, of the backgrounds, circumstances, experiences and aspirations of those in status zer0. Based on a single source of information (Careers Service data) to avoid double counting, the South Glamorgan study took the Pupil Destination Survey data as a baseline and then, making persuasive assumptions (although they were still *assumptions*) concerning mobility and morbidity, proceeded to analyse the careers data, particularly in relation to missing data. It was further assumptions about the 'missing' that proved subsequently to be politically contentious. Yet even without incorporating the 'missing', it was clear that significantly more young people were outside education, training or employment than was officially conceded. Few acknowledged, for example, those young people who registered with the careers service but *refused* the offer of a training place: they wanted a job, nothing else. When one added in those who were 'missing' from the data for some or all of the two-year period after the cohort had left school, on the assumption that any formal participation in education, training or employment would have been recorded, the 'status zer0' analysis pointed to significant numbers in these circumstances both *at any one time* and *over time*. Indeed, the numerical estimates suggested that, at any one time, between 16% and 23% of 16 and 17 year olds in South Glamorgan had been in 'status zer0'. Furthermore, a majority of those who had been in 'status zer0' had been in those circumstances for more than six months; in other words, it had been a relatively long-term experience during the first two years after leaving school.

Because 'status zer0' young people were, by definition, invisible to the system, they were difficult to find. Nonetheless, the qualitative work uncovered a 'tangle of pathologies' which had propelled young people into status zer0. Most had experienced various combinations of school exclusion, family breakdown, personal trauma and social upheaval. Education, training and employment was not high on their agenda, although the need for 'survival' income was pressing. As a result, most had at first drifted into, and later become more calculating in their involvement in, informal and illegal economic activity. For a few, this was highly lucrative, if always risky, and rendered training allowances and youth wages in the formal economy patently unattractive. Most, however, had not completely rejected engagement with formal structures of training and employment, although they were generally scathing about the level of the allowance and the perceived quality of training. The South Glamorgan study distinguished between those young people (the majority) who represented *policy possibilities* and those who were *policy problematics*. The former group had not wholehearted rejected training provision, although they had clear - and different - ideas of what would be acceptable to them, and more strategic intervention might at some point, if not immediately (because they had more urgent priorities in their lives), support their re-engagement. The latter group were adamant, again for different reasons, that they would not be drawn into existing training programmes: either because they firmly condemned their quality and effectiveness or because they had 'better' (and more lucrative) things to do.

The South Glamorgan report received considerable publicity, although the issues of 'disaffection', exclusion and non-participation did not take off until a commentary on and endorsement of the research in the *Independent* newspaper. Initially, the research was condemned at local and national level by politicians and by professionals responsible for the delivery of education, training and guidance services to young people. Politicians argued that Britain was the only country in Europe to have a youth training guarantee: if young people chose not to take it up, that was their problem. Professionals questioned the assumption made in the research that all of the 'missing' were in status zer0: many, they asserted, were probably *working* in one way or another. This was no doubt true (if somewhat speculative), but the researchers countered that it required a very elastic definition of *employment*, since the work being referred to was invariably temporary, casual, 'cash-in-hand' and not subject to health and safety and other statutory regulations - if not downright illegal. There was also a scathing response to the terminology. 'Status A' was rapidly substituted for 'status 0' in the published report, since the latter expression was deemed unacceptable by at least some senior professionals, who maintained that it projected a deficit model of young people and was an

emotive, negative concept. Yet it had first been no more than a shorthand, technical depiction of the *status* of young people NOT in education, training or employment, to be compared and contrasted with the status of those in education (status 1), training (status 2) and employment (status 3). It was only later felt that 'status zer0' served as an apt metaphor for young people who apparently counted for nothing and were going nowhere.

The other mechanism for rebutting the findings of the South Glamorgan study was that it was only a local study, which was possibly geographically atypical. The researchers had acknowledged this possibility, but drew attention to the range of socio-economic locales within the county (from inner city and peripheral council estates to rural contexts) and to the fact that South Glamorgan tended to fall mid-way in the national statistics on a number of relevant criteria (such as unemployment levels and schools performance). While there was, therefore, no certainty that the findings of the South Glamorgan study could be extrapolated and applied elsewhere, there was a reasonable confidence that its conclusions would have some relevance and application in other contexts (a confidence which has subsequently been vindicated).

There has certainly been strong corroboration of the *numerical* estimates derived from the South Glamorgan study. Since 1993, there have been numerous 'status zer0' studies. These have been focused on diverse geographical areas with different populations. They have been differentially resourced, adopted a range of methodologies, classified non-participating young people in a variety of ways and arrived at different statistical conclusions. But none has seriously undermined the indicative findings of the South Glamorgan study and most have supported them.

In terms of the *qualitative*, illuminative work of the South Glamorgan study, subsequently studies have generated rather different findings. In particular, a study of Mid Glamorgan conducted by some of the original South Glamorgan research team (Istance and Williamson 1996) suggested that status zer0 young people are not necessarily the 'victims' of pathological circumstances. In Mid Glamorgan (where the numerical estimates, incidentally, bordered on 25%), its specific political and cultural history, coupled with its contemporary dire economic position, helped to explain why many quite 'ordinary', if low achieving, young people were not in education, training or employment. Training programmes, in the eyes of *both* young people *and* their families and communities, were irrelevant when jobs were either non-existent or low-skilled (demanding little training). As a result, communities (and specifically extended families) *supported* their young people in non-participation. This, together with widespread opportunities in the informal labour market, served to make non-participation a relatively attractive, and authentic, choice for those young people who, by virtue of their poor educational attainment, would continue to lack competitiveness in the formal labour market, irrespective of any training they might undertake. There was little pressure to engage in such training: parents and the community also thought that the 'new' training programmes were 'slave labour' and didn't lead to jobs. In turn, young people knew their occupational and economic futures were bleak, but that the present was palatable, and they were going to make the most of it. This stands in stark contrast to the South Glamorgan young people, for whom the present was proving extremely tough but who were optimistic that the future, once they had got over current difficulties, would be brighter. Neither was necessarily objectively true, but these were the subjective views that informed and guided their everyday decision-making.

Although 'status zer0' had initially proved to be a contentious term, it steadily invaded the political imagination. Some government officials favoured the conceptualisation of those young people outside of education, training and employment as NEET young people (Not in Education, Employment or Training): it had a less problematic ring to it. But the concept of 'status zer0' provided a crisp challenge to the efficacy of the education and training policies of a government which, in 1996, was still celebrating the dramatic increase in those staying on in post-16 education and the apparent success of attaching vocational achievement to the

funding procedures for youth training. What appeared to be working very well for a majority of young people was now coming to be acknowledged as simultaneously failing a significant minority. The growth in permanent exclusions from secondary schooling, and the long tail of educational failure noted in the Dearing Report provided further evidence of the marginalisation of what was clearly more than a residual category of young people.

As political recognition of a significant body of 'disaffected' young people increased, attention turned both to a closer examination of the nature of disaffection (its causes and consequences) and to an exploration of appropriate policy responses.

It is clear that the 'disaffected' (as young people *disconnected* from mainstream education and training structures have come to be called) are by no means an homogenous group. 'Disaffected' itself is a contested term, since it implies an alienated attitude on the part of young people, when most qualitative evidence concerning exclusion and non-participation suggests that it is a complex interplay between *institutional* and *individual* decision-making which leads to so-called 'disaffection'. Furthermore, as the evidence has mounted, so the social, psychological and labour market strands of disaffection can be more clearly distinguished. There is now less attention being paid to securing precise estimates of the *numbers* of young people who may be considered disaffected (since this is well nigh impossible and heavily contingent on the criteria invoked) and more concern about framing the *dimensions* of disaffection, both in terms of underlying and precipitating causes and in terms of personal and structural criteria. The 1998 House of Commons Education and Employment Select Committee report on *Disaffected Children* (Education Committee 1998), based on the prevailing evidence about disaffected young people aged 14 to 19, proved to be a powerful acknowledgement of the scale and issues concerning non-participation in education and training. While it suggested that official statistics are grossly unreliable and that numerical estimates may range from 100,000 to 200,000, it saw disaffection and its causal factors as a major public policy challenge, demanding greater coherence and co-operation between agencies at the local level.

The reason for the advocacy by the Committee of 'local forums' to co-ordinate a strategic response to disaffection lies in the complexity of the issue. 'Disaffection' cannot be pinned simply on psychological problems, social contexts or labour market priorities; all too often, it relates to all three. The Select Committee noted that underlying causes included cultures of unemployment, family instability, peer group orientation, and (often unrecognised) learning disabilities and medical problems. Precipitating causes included racism and bullying in schools, the league table pressures on schools for pupils to achieve successes at GCSE above grade C, young people's perceptions of poor prospects in the labour market, competing demands on and priorities for young people's time, and the impact of cultures of drug misuse and crime.

A useful way of conceptualising, and making sense, of 'disaffection' lies in positioning disaffected young people within social/personal, psychological and labour market typologies. There may, of course, be significant overlaps between them. Socially, there will always be some young people physically present in education and training but disengaged from the processes of learning: in the system, but outside learning. (These may be the most difficult to *detect.*) Others will have disappeared from the system, but will not present any wider public policy issue, since they will be rotting away at home, in front of the TV, video or game machine, concealed by their families. (These may be the most difficult to *discover*.) Two further groups present broader public policy challenges. There are those who have been diverted by the drink and drugs cultures (for many different reasons), who inhabit public space and often create public order problems. And finally there are those who are actively engaged in informal and illegal economic activity, cultivating alternative ways of 'getting by'. This should not be romanticised. Beyond the social consequences of this behaviour, it is

usually only a short-term solution, which is unlikely to be desirable or sustainable into adult life.

Psychologists have invoked a mental health classification to portray the 'disaffected'. These have resonances with elements of the social classification presented above, but are qualitatively different. First, there are young people who, for a variety of reasons, are personally alienated from formal systems of education and training: they are irrelevant to their current concerns or personal futures; such young people have alternative priorities (such as caring for relatives, or helping with the family business). Secondly, there are those who display anti-social behaviour in institutional settings (which may lead to exclusion) but who are well connected to their families, peers and communities. In other words, behaviour that is deemed unacceptable in formal settings is normative in their wider world. Thirdly, there are those who are 'conduct disordered' as a result of deep dysfunctional histories (such as child abuse) which may not always have been detected and diagnosed. Fourthly, there are the 'emotionally disordered': young people whose behaviour and attitudes are erratic as a result of depression, stress or anxiety.

The Northern Ireland 'status zer0' study (Armstrong et al 1996) suggested that young people could be positioned on a continuum relating to their current engagement with the labour market. Drawing on its 'Typology of Experiences', it argues that young people may be located at seven points across a spectrum between work (or training) and no work:

1. Status OK - has left a training scheme and found work or is *purposefully* involved in a training scheme (my emphasis)

2. Status '0 Active' - not in training or employment but actively seeking work

3. Status 'Limb'0' - registered with a training agency but receiving no training

4. Status 'Y0-Y0' - a pattern of returning to, or leaving, work or training after a short period

5. Status Vulnerable - a state of high dependency on community training provision; no successful transition to work

6. Status '0 Inactive' - not in training or employment and not seeking work

7. Status 0n Hold - has been in training but currently in custody

(Source: Northern Ireland 'status zer0' study)

There is, then, a complex picture emerging concerning the nature of 'disaffection' and the relationship of the 'disaffected' to the training and labour markets. It is, however, important to remember that there has always been some level of non-participation, particularly in post-16 training provision ever since this became something of a mainstream 'option' in 1979. Indeed, Youthaid suggested that by the mid-1980s, some one in ten young people eligible for YTS chose not to participate in it (Horton 1985). Of course, they then had the option of unemployment, with benefits, which was subsequently removed. Yet even after entitlement to benefits was withdrawn for 16 and 17 year olds, it was estimated by the British Youth Council that some 30,000 young people annually 'voted with their feet' and elected not to participate in training provision (British Youth Council 1992). This level of marginalisation has been confirmed in the recent Youth Cohort Study analysis, based on a longitudinal study of all those born during one week in 1970. Its report (Bynner et al 1997) was subtitled *Getting On, Getting By, Getting Nowhere* and it pointed to a growing polarisation in transition, with a significant minority 'getting nowhere'. Tellingly, it observed that 'nowhere'

was becoming a harder place to be: without benefits, and serving to steadily worsen prospects for the future. Hence the urgency of a more effective policy response to those who withdraw or are excluded from mainstream pathways of transition through education and training.

Even before the new Labour administration in May 1997 and the establishment of the Social Exclusion Unit at the heart of government (whose first report was on truancy and exclusion), the Conservative government announced pilot initiatives to address 'disaffection' under the Relaunch programme in England and the Youth Access Initiative in Wales. These offered additional resourcing in response to bids from local partnerships (of, for example, TECs, local authorities, careers services and the voluntary sector) to develop innovative strategies for maintaining the integration of potentially 'disaffected' young people and for the reintegration of those already 'disaffected'. A further round of New Start funding was announced in early 1999.

'Partnership' is one of those weasel words (like 'community' and 'enterprise') which eludes precise definition but always appears eminently attractive. It is hard to argue *against* partnership. But whatever their merits, partnerships invariably conceal implicit hierarchies and a myriad of tensions. Not least, the different agencies involved are working to different priorities and separate agendas, even if they *all* recognise the overlap in their target 'clientele' and the mutual benefit of effective intervention. It is, of course, always easier to identify reasons for *not* collaborating, even when all would agree that there is a *prima facie* case for doing so. Furthermore, there is an historical legacy to shed: the previous government established funding mechanisms based on output delivery which, based as they were on clear demarcation lines, militated against cross-agency partnership. The new government has endeavoured to reverse such isolationism and unproductive competitiveness and to encourage partnership practice to delivery a range of initiatives in education and training, such as in Education Action Zones and the multiplicity of 'New Deal's. It has exhorted public, private and voluntary sectors to pull and work together to improve participation and to raise standards. But many of the former funding mechanisms are still in place, making genuine partnership practice still difficult to operationalise outside of the specific, and often pilot, funding made available only through this approach (such as the Youth Access Initiative).

There is then the question of the *roles* which different partners should play. We have already mapped out some theoretical thinking about how to develop an effective strategic approach on the issue of 'disaffection', incorporating attention to the personal, social and vocational needs of 'disaffected' young people (Williamson et al 1997). This entails recognition that community-based projects may have a key role in establishing contact with, and building the confidence of such young people prior to 'referring' them on to more specialist guidance and support. The capacity (and motivation) of such projects to engage in an effective 'handover' is a critical issue in implementing an effective response to 'disaffection'. Projects close to the ground often claim that they have a special and privileged relationship with young people vulnerable to 'disaffection' (a claim rarely disputed by those further down the chain, such as colleges of further education, careers services, Training and Enterprise Councils, the Employment Service, and training providers). However, they also often align themselves with the perspectives of those young people (particularly their caution and suspicion about engaging in training) and do not face up to their responsibility to, wherever and whenever possible, move young people on, preferring to argue that their own provision is sufficient. This is naive: (few) disaffected young people will get the opportunity to play guitars or make videos for ever, even if this is an important first step in demonstrating competence and building motivation. To avoid or ignore opportunities to move these young people forward is, in effect, to collude with their exclusion. The Education and Employment Select Committee bit the bullet when it asserted that it was critical to keep all young people *as close as possible* to learning (and training). It also warned against the proliferation of Mickey Mouse qualifications, designed to recognise 'small step' achievement but of no value whatsoever in

the labour market. Once this became apparent to the recipients it was more likely to compound disaffection, rather than alleviate it.

Thus there has to be a meeting of the ways if partnerships between agencies with very different philosophies and practices are to prove effective in tackling disaffection. Those agencies whose primary concern and focus is on *outcomes* have to acknowledge that work concerned with *process* is often a necessary preliminary, indeed pre-condition, to *purposeful* engagement with more formal training. Conversely, process-oriented agencies need to recognise that more marginalised young people will only regain competitiveness in the wider labour market if they can access and acquire certification and qualifications which have a currency in that market. More personalised recognition of personal and social achievement remains important in instilling confidence (provided it is not 'sold' as possessing some broader currency) and in preparing young people for considering re-engagement in more mainstream activity - but it is that mainstream activity which must always remain the ultimate goal.

Postscript – June 1999

By June 1999, yet more systematic work had been undertaken by various research institutes on the scale and nature of youth 'disaffection'. The Institute of Public Policy Research produced *Wasted Youth* (Pearce and Hillman 1998), subtitled 'combating exclusion and tackling underachievement'. It argued for a more flexible curriculam offer to young people between the ages of 14 and 19. More recently, a DEMOS report has been more radical (Bentley and Gurmurthy 1999). It advocates a range of learning pathways, beginning at fourteen and all "continuing for at least five years", within which qualifications would be achieved through different combinations of activity and experience. The DEMOS report assesses the scale of 'off-register' young people aged 16 to 24 and concludes that one in ten of this age group falls into this category. This represents a number equivalent to those who *are* claiming unemployment-related benefits: some 624,000 people. They are classifed in the following way:

- sixteen to seventeen year olds: those in 'status zero' (21% of the off-register group)
- mothers and carers (55% of the total 18-24 group)
- the 'missing' (13% of the total group)
- 'marginal learners' – those studying part-time and/or balancing study with caring responsibilities (6% of the total group)

This work has been paralleled by a detailed inquiry by the Social Exclusion Unit into 16 and 17 year olds not in education, training or employment (NEET young people). That report is expected in the autumn of 1999.

What has not yet been distinguished, however, is the difference amongst the 'disaffected' between the "temporarily sidetracked, the essentially confused and the deeply alienated" (Williamson and Middlemiss 1999). This will be a difficult judgement to make, but it will at some point be necessary if interventions are to be appropriately pitched, in both intensity and duration. At least it is now recognised that the term 'disaffection' is probably inappropriate as a catch all phrase to depict those young people who are disconnected or disengaged from mainstream routes of transition to adulthood. 'Disengagement' is more apposite, in that it conveys the outcome of *actions* taken by institutions and individuals, intentional or otherwise. It does not apportion blame and responsibility. Numerous plans and strategies are now being considered and implemented to maintain 'engagement' and to promote 're-engagement'. Some young people will be more receptive to these than others.

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