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Young people on the margins: in need of more choices and more chances in twenty-first century Scotland

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The aim of this study was to find out more about the lives of young people in the category 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET). We worked intensively with 26 young people in four smaller groups, spending three days with each group. During our time with them we engaged in a variety of creative and artistic activities designed to help them to construct accounts of their lives for us with the purpose of gaining an understanding of what it was like to be NEET. Three significant issues that emerged from these life stories are discussed in this paper. These are the problematic nature of the discourse of NEET sub-groups; the challenges of school-exclusion policies and practices; and the myth of low aspirations.

Davie's story

Davie was a lively and talkative young man. He was a fan of Tupac Shakur and liked to write rap lyrics. He had a book filled with rhymes that he kept in a locked box under his bed; he said these reflected his 'private thoughts'. Davie spoke openly about his criminal convictions and the different remand homes he had lived in over the years. His first offence was stabbing his mother's boyfriend, although he described this as an assault on his mother and said that his action was to protect her:

> I was put in a home when I was 10 years old for stabbin' my mum's boyfriend. He was battering my two wee brothers—battering my mum with high heels on [laughs at the image of the boyfriend wearing high heels]—not high heels on, with a high heel, battered her head. When I was on the way up here I saw him. Next time I see him I'm gonna chop him up.

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He had been in and out of young offenders' institutions (YOIs) since that incident, although he was living with his mother when we spoke with him. He described his father as a 'crack head' who was a chef in England and said that he did not want to end up like his father: 'my Dad—he started takin heroin. He's in rehab now. His restaurant is called [name of restaurant], down in [English city]'. However, Davie had learned to cook in one of the YOIs and thought of this as a possible career. He described graphically life in a YOI:

> I was in a secure unit—I can't remember what it was called—I was in a straight jacket. Secure unit since I was 10 'til I was 16…in a home—don't know, just in a home locked up 24/7…It's a hard life in care—I didnae like it at all. I seen a guy get cut up, like, when I was only 12 years old. And I broke my jaw in three places. Rougher than jail—see them homes, man. Whew!

Davie was the father of a two-year-old girl whom he rarely saw. The mother, who was 19, did not wish him to see the child. He also spoke of significant territorial issues in his area. When driving around certain parts with the researchers he told them that he could not get out of the car for fear of being attacked. Davie reported that he 'must have done just about every course' open to him and had not been able to find employment. He did not receive any income from the state. He hoped to do a three-year cookery course at college.

At the time we conducted our research, Davie was in the category referred to as 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET). We are not claiming that his story is typical of young people in this category. Indeed, below we argue that there is no typical story. However, some elements of Davie's narrative were reflected in the stories of other young people involved in our research; other elements were not. The main aim of our research was to explore the lives of young people in the NEET category.

Introduction

For the past 10 years the proportion of young people aged 16–19 in the NEET category has remained at around 13.5% of the age group, about 35,000 young people, in Scotland. The Scottish Government's strategy document, *More choices, more chances* (Scottish Executive, 2006) estimated that around 20,000 of these young people are likely to require further support. In order to provide appropriate support it is necessary to identify not just the symptoms of being unemployed and not in any form of education or training, but to gain an understanding of the lives that these young people are living and also something of the personal histories that led them to their current situations.

The research on which this paper is based explored the experiences, hopes and aspirations, barriers faced and support received by a group of young people in the NEET category. It was funded by Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) but the views expressed in this paper are those of the researchers. At the request of the LTS, the study concentrated on the most marginalised young people in the NEET category so the findings cannot be assumed to be typical of young people in this category.

The research activity, as defined and commissioned by LTS had, *inter alia*, the following objectives:

- to develop a profile of NEET individuals;
- to outline their experiences whilst at school;
- to determine how well prepared they felt when making the transition from school to the adult world;
- to outline their experiences since leaving school;
- to explore the hopes and aspirations of these young people;
- to identify barriers they have experienced; and
- to identify support they have received.

Context for the research

During the last decade in Europe, there has been growing interest in public policy directed towards young people (Kahan-Strawczynski, 2003; Maguire & Rennison, 2005; Yates & Payne, 2006; Vanttaja & Jarvinen, 2006). While a variety of reasons have been put forward to explain this emphasis, a central focus of these policies appears to be around the issues of social and economic exclusion (Conrad, 2005), that is, the fear that excluded youth, or those at risk of being excluded socially, may not become productive, contributing members of society. These social and economic concerns, together with the fear that a poorly educated population unable to make informed choices is a threat to democracy, have led particular policy concerns to be directed to those young people who leave, or who are about to leave, full-time education at the minimum age of 16 and then spend a substantial period NEET.

A review of the NEET literature shows that the term is relatively recent but has some overlap with terms previously used to refer to young people, such as: 'Status zer0' (Williamson, 1997); 'Generation X' (Pearce & Hillman, 1998); 'Getting nowhere' (Bynner *et al.*, 1997); 'Off register' (Bentley & Gurumurphy, 1999); 'At risk' (Conrad, 2005); 'Wasted youth', 'Disengaged', 'Disaffected', 'Disappeared young people' (DfES, 2007); and 'High-risk category of non-college bound youth' (Worthington & Juntunen, 1997). Specifically, the term NEET is used collectively to refer to the 16–19-year-old group who, during the critical period of the late teens, spend a substantial amount of time outside any form of education, employment or training.

According to the 'NEET' literature, the issues of active engagement in the labour market and the means to enter it through education or training, coupled with the urgent need for young people to make successful transitions to adulthood (Bynner & Parsons, 2002), are key components of governments' approaches to policy concerning young people.

There are problems with the use of 'NEET' as a label for describing a large group of young people and one of the criticisms is that the term assumes, or at least endorses, the belief that all young people who are at a given time not in education, working or receiving training could be thought of as a homogeneous group facing

similar difficulties and risks and susceptible to identical forms of professional help or intervention. This, however, runs contrary to research evidence (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Hopwood & Hunter, 2006; Spielhofer *et al.*, 2006; Yates & Payne, 2006), which shows that subsumed under the 'NEET' label are often very different groups of young people exhibiting very different characteristics, facing very different challenges, risks and transitions and with very different potential needs for intervention. 'NEET', then, can be challenged as a universal label. This was recognised by the Scottish Government when, in September 2007, Fiona Hyslop, the Cabinet Secretary for Education, rejected the term NEET, arguing that it 'labels unemployed youngsters'. She refers to them as 'young people in need of more choices, more chances'. We continue to use the term NEET in this paper because when the research was carried out this was the operational term and it allows us to draw on the growing literature that continues to use the term.

Also open to challenge is the assumption that NEET is automatically a negative or problematic state inherently linked either to social exclusion or disadvantage. This assumption, which appears to run through some NEET literature, is challenged both in research publications (Yates & Payne, 2006) and policy documents (see, e.g., Scottish Executive, 2006), which identify young people within the NEET group, for example those with parental or caring responsibilities and those in transitional states, for whom being NEET is not necessarily a negative or problematic situation. For these groups of young people the conceptual linking of NEET with social exclusion or disadvantages could portray as problematic transitions that do not, in fact, present them with any perceived problems.

Although the NEET literature acknowledges that there is no such thing as 'a one-size-fits-all' attitude to towards the issue of risk factors for NEETness, there are a number of themes which appear to be relevant. These themes include: deprivation; financial exclusion; low attainment; weak family and other support networks (such as peers); stigma and attitudes of others; and debt aversity. Of all these themes, young people who are disaffected with schooling in the form of exclusion, truancy or bullying are found to be at an increased risk of becoming NEET (Payne, 2000, cited by Maguire & Rennison, 2005).

This review of the literature can be summarised in the following points:

- Because the term NEET covers such a wide range of young people's circumstances, no assumption that NEET status is by definition problematic can be made.
- There is a range of issues that lead to problematic NEET status. These include: deprivation; financial exclusion; low prior attainment; weak family and other support networks; stigma and attitudes of others; and debt aversion.
- Since poor prior experience of education is only one factor in the problematic NEET category, solutions cannot be wholly educational. Health, housing and social services have an equally important role to play, often before educational, employment or training engagement can be attempted.

In our research we addressed the issues above with young people in the NEET category. We tried to identify how some of these factors or themes played out or had

relevance in the lives of a group of young people. Not only did we try to identify issues that the young people found problematic about their circumstances, but we also attempted to identify what worked for them. In conducting the research we adopted a range of data gathering techniques that are not common in social research. In the next section we explain our reasons for adopting the approach we took and then we follow this up with a detailed description of the practicalities of our research method.

Methodological approach

This project involved an exploration of the experiences, hopes and aspirations of young people who are located on the margins of Scottish society and required an approach that elicited rich, in-depth data. The challenges associated with the use of conventional qualitative research processes among individuals who are marginalised within society are well documented. Curtis *et al.* (2004), drawing upon their own and others' research experiences, discussed a number of difficulties associated with interviewing participants described as having 'challenging behaviour'. These difficulties included participants feeling ignored due to questions not being directed specifically at them in focus groups; feelings of frustration at having to elaborate on responses; and reluctance to be interviewed. They point out that many researchers assume that young people want to talk and can articulate their thoughts when, in fact, this is not necessarily or always the case. For those with learning difficulties, generalising from experience and thinking in abstract terms can be problematic (Booth & Booth, 1996).

Researchers have begun to recognise the value of engaging marginalised groups in research activities that give them more choices in relation to the subject matter and research design than they would have as interview or questionnaire respondents (Hill *et al.*, 2004). In relation to individuals with communication difficulties for example, the literature suggests different types of communication tools (Beresford, 1997; Ward, 1997) as well as visual aids, props and games (Beresford, 1997; Berson & Meisburger, 1998). These techniques appeal because they are concrete and tactile rather than abstract and verbal and allow participants the opportunity to shape the agenda (Thomas & O'Kane, 2000). They engage the researchers in dialogue with participants and encourage the exploration of their life stories. This approach is a form of narrative research involving the researcher collecting participants' stories, retelling them and collaborating with storytellers before producing a narrative report. It has been argued that such narrative methods provide access to the perspectives and experiences of oppressed groups who lack the power to make their voices heard through traditional methods of academic discourse (Booth & Booth, 1996).

Despite calls for the development of new ways to elicit the views of young people, published research that has utilised innovative qualitative methods such as those used in this study is scarce. In a review of the education literature, only a handful of studies were located that had used alternative qualitative methods. The majority of these involved research with children. Thomas and O'Kane (2000), in a study which explored decision making among looked-after children, reported that children, during individual interviews, were given a choice of activities which included making

charts, constructing timelines and stories and drawing. In group sessions, games, posters, drawings, jigsaws and role-play were used to create a variety of opportunities for children to express their views. The authors found that children who lacked confidence in verbal discussions with adults were easily engaged by these activities. Moreover, drawings provided a powerful means of prompting children to talk about their views and provided data that could be analysed comparatively. Perhaps most importantly, the research method allowed the children's concerns to define the research agenda.

Drawing from the field of anthropology, some studies have used dramatic engagement as a means of generating research data. This approach draws on participants' experiences to collectively create theatre and engage in discussion of issues through theatrical means and has typically been used with adolescents to explore issues relevant to their lives and as a moral education tool. Conrad (2004) conducted a theatre project with 'at-risk' high school drama students to collectively draw out, represent and question their experiences. The process was found to be useful in allowing participants to re-examine their beliefs and, in turn, provide new insights and critical understandings of risky youth experiences. The advantage of these performance approaches to research lies in their uncovering of the meanings of lived experience (Denzin, 1997). Indeed, it has been argued that some types of cultural knowledge cannot be expressed simply in discursive statements, but can be represented through action or performance (Fabian, 1990).

Despite the strong advantages of using the kinds of innovative qualitative methods described here, limitations should be acknowledged. While the probability of multiple perspectives emerging from the data might be seen as an advantage (by offering different interpretations and fresh insights), such ambiguity can be problematic as different people confer their own meaning to the data, making it impossible to reach consensus and precision (Eisner, 1997).

Other drawbacks include questions surrounding how to display findings and persuading the audience that findings are legitimate. Nevertheless, addressing these questions can expand our conceptions by exploring the frontiers of what educational research means, how it is pursued and what can be learned from it.

The methodology in practice

We considered it unlikely that the young people who were the focus of our study would have been stimulated by methods such as questionnaires, interviews or focus groups. Using these conventional methods may have led to inarticulate responses or may not even have been successful at generating responses at all. Our view was that conventional research methods would not yield the rich accounts of the young people's lives that are necessary for the kind of understanding that would lead to effective policy recommendations.

In light of these considerations and the evidence in the literature, we decided to use a creative qualitative approach that engaged participants and allowed them to work with us in ways that were comfortable to them. However, it should be noted that this

'participant-led' approach, whilst enabling the young people to express their views and knowledge, did have limitations in the context of this project. The young people were encouraged with open-ended questions to speak generally about the research objectives, but a structured interview schedule was not developed. The intention was to encourage the young people to talk freely and to prioritise the issues and contributions they wished to make. Therefore, their responses provided more data against some research objectives than others. Where this was a factor in the data collection and analysis, this has been noted in the sections that follow.

A multi-media and multi-activity approach was adopted, with a view to encouraging participants to share their experiences of schooling; of the transition from school to the adult world; of their experiences since leaving school; of their hopes and aspirations for the future; and of real and perceived barriers and assistance to achieving these aspirations.

All our sites were identified through personal contacts by two of the team members. Our aim was to identify young people in pre-existent groups who were being supported and developed by statutory or voluntary agencies. We also aimed to involve young people who had a range of the characteristics and conditions that others have identified as increasing the risk of NEET status, e.g. being a young parent, care leaver, drug user, young offender, young carer, not having achieved well at school etc. We also wanted to involve young people in our research who came from a range of the 'NEET hotspots', areas in Scotland that have a disproportionately high number of young people in the NEET category. The groups came from four local authority areas across central Scotland: however to preserve the anonymity of the participants our sites have been coded throughout the report as sites A through D.

Group 1, Site A. This was the largest group with 10^{1} participants: six male and four female. These young people were part of a scheme run at Site A, the purpose of which is to gain some understanding of work ethic. Each young person who attends earns more, financially, than they would on benefits. Most had been together for a number of weeks so there was a strong interpersonal dimension.

Group 2, Site B. This group of young people (five participants: four male and one female) were brought together specifically for the research project. Each had been telephoned by the newly appointed youth worker and asked if they wished to participate in the research. At the start of day one there were four participants and then one of the young people asked if his friend could join the group. We all agreed and so a fifth young person, who lived close to the space in which we were meeting, joined in.

Group 3, Site C. The young people (six in total: four male and two female) were all part of the Site C project. Most of the work is of an individual nature but they can also attend group sessions/activities that appeal to them. A few of the young people

knew each other through a social setting while others had just met for the first time. Two youth workers accompanied the group and were sensitive to the group dynamic, withdrawing when necessary to give the young people disclosure time and supporting and joining in with the camaraderie at other times.

Group 4, Site D. The young people in this group (five in total: three male, two female) were supported by the local council. A youth worker had invited the individuals to participate in the project and those who arrived knew each other through social circles. All these young people lived in homeless units.

All the young people took part in a discussion about their involvement in the project and were given information sheets and consent forms. The young people were offered a range of levels of consent. They had the opportunity to discuss these and ask questions and were advised that they could change their minds and increase or withdraw their consents at any point in the project. Most participants gave full consent to their involvement, allowing names and faces to be recorded on the DVDs we produced for each site. These DVDs were only available for the young people and gave them a record of their involvement in the project. We also produced a composite DVD for use with a limited range of policy stakeholders. On this DVD the young people's names were removed.

The activities were spread over three-day sessions with each of the four groups of participants. The three days were split into an initial two-day slot, followed by a further day after the interval of one week. In broad terms the activities used over these three days were:

- On the first two days the groups of young people engaged in a range of drama, video and audio productions, all designed to encourage them to talk about their life experiences.
- During the intervening week, participants had the opportunity to prepare for the final day by taking photos with a disposable camera that was issued to them or with their mobile phones.
- On the third day, during the morning session, they produced individual collages, which were used as the basis of a discussion with one of the researchers and in the afternoon they used the photographs they took to produce a storyboard using a proprietary computer package.

By engaging participants in these kinds of activities, we were able to capture the emotional as well as descriptive elements of their experiences.

Our approach to data analysis

The physical data derived from the activities described above comprised several hours of video material from the first two days of drama activities. This was available for all of the sites. It also comprised seven individual collages from three of the sites with

associated recorded interviews with the young people who had produced the collages. Finally, there were three storyboards from three of the sites, again with associated recorded interviews. The responsibility for analysing the data for each site was given to members of the team who had not been involved in the fieldwork or who had only been minimally involved. This ensured that the initial analysis was removed from any personal knowledge of the young people gained through their recruitment or through information shared outside of the research activities. The team analysed the data against the research objectives, picking out factors that addressed these points and identifying illustrative quotations from the young people.

Significant discussions and material from the young people, which were outside of the research objectives, were also coded and collated. Throughout the project we encouraged the young people to express their views freely and the findings are presented, in part, in their own words. These individual site analyses were then combined into an overview narrative on the research objectives. For eight of the young people, these transcriptions were collated into holistic personal accounts. Davie's story that starts this paper is an example of one of the individual narratives. These eight young people were selected from the sample to form a representation of a range of characteristics, gender, age and geography. Both the individual narrative accounts and the summary related to the objectives were then checked by the whole team including, most importantly, the fieldworkers to make sure the reported findings had reliability within the team. Finally, the key issues emerging from the findings were drafted and agreed with the whole team.

The project involved a large team, to ensure that a range of data collection, youth work, research and analysis skills were available. This did mean that throughout the project members of the team were working to skill strengths, but the approach did raise some challenges. Perhaps most significant is the highly interpretive nature of this type of data analysis and the approach demanded regular and repeated review of the analysis and conclusions across the entire team to ensure the full contribution of field-workers to the analysis. Also, the analysis team did not have the benefit of first hand observations of the sites and the young people, were working to the video footage to be able to visualize the data collection and did not have the practical experience of delivering the activities. However, we submit that our findings and the issues we raise can be robustly defended from the data collected.

Issues relating to NEETs

In this paper we present three policy-related issues that arose from the data analysis process described above:

- the problematic nature of the discourse of NEET sub-groups;
- the challenges of school-exclusion policies and practices; and
- the myth of low aspirations.

These are the issues for which there is most evidence in the narratives constructed by the young people. We treat each of these in turn below.

The discourse of NEET sub-groups

It is our view that the continued use of the concept of NEET sub-groups is unhelpful. It is certainly the case that young care leavers, teenage parents, drug users, young offenders and so on are represented in the group of young people we worked with. Table 1 illustrates the range of profiles based on information that the young people disclosed during our work with them.

Reading across Table 1 we can understand the attraction of identifying sub-groups. For example, 9 of the 19 young people disclosed that they used drugs or alcohol, 10 had engaged in offending behaviour and 11 had poor records of attendance at school or multiple exclusions from school. Thus, one could argue that our data supports the identification of, for example, a sub-group of *Young people with drugs or alcohol abuse problems*, or a subgroup of *Offenders* (Scottish Executive, 2006).

Reading down the table we can also find support for the assertion that some young people are members of several of these sub-groups. So, for example, young person 2 in Site A reported having had drug or alcohol abuse problems and having been an offender. So our data would appear to support the evidence of statistical groups. However, the strength of our research is that we were able to explore more deeply than statistics can, the lives and attitudes of the young people. When this is done, the

Table 1. Disclosed profiles* of young people

	Source				Disclosure (%)
Circumstance/characteristic	A	B	C	D	(n = 19)
Homeless		2		1, 4	16
Lack of money	1, 5, 7	2	1,	1	32
Drug taking/alcohol abuse	1, 2, 4	2, 4	1	1, 3, 5	47
Supervision orders/convictions	1, 2, 9	4	1, 2	1, 2, 3, 5	53
Custodial sentences		4	1		11
Chronic depression/self harm	1	2, 1		2,4	26
Family alcoholism/drugs		4	5	4	16
Partner in jail				3	5
Foster care/care homes		2, 4	1		16
Being a parent		4	5	3	16
Child taken away				3	5
Poor school record/exclusions	2, 4, 5, 7, 9	4	1, 2, 5, 6	3	58
Victim of violent crime		2, 4		3	16
Family/friend bereavement		2	1		11
Eating disorder		2		3	11
Given up work/lost job	1, 7, 9				16

Notes. *Since we used open-ended data gathering approaches, we have data only on what the young people told us about themselves. If a young person had been homeless, for instance, but did not disclose this, it would clearly not appear. Thus the data may understate the frequencies of the above characteristics or circumstances among the young people we dealt with. In the Table the four sites are listed A–D and the numbers in each column are the designator numbers of young people in those sites.

concept of sociological sub-groups, with or without multiple memberships, begins to break down.

Three of the young people in our sample identified themselves as being young parents. However, we would argue that there is not a teen parents' sub-group. Being a teen parent is one characteristic of several of the young people with whom we worked but they were not a homogeneous group. They comprised a young man who desperately wanted to be involved in the upbringing of his child. His attitude towards becoming a father was very responsible and mature and he contrasted his desire to be a good dad with his experiences with his own father:

> Researcher: You're gonna be a dad. How do you feel about that?
>
> I'm shittin' it just because I'm scared of failure. I don't think I'll be that bad…See, my dad left me when I was a month old and I never seen him for 14 years, and then he did it again so he's completely out of my life. I tell him to stay away, because he's a waste of time…He said, 'You're too young to be a dad'. I said, 'At least I ken to accept my responsibility'…I'll never give up on my child no matter how hard it gets—I'll never give up. I've got the backing of my family and friends…I'm really close with my Mum. She took it really well. The only thing is she's scared of is whether it's mine or not, which is quite understandable nowadays.

A second young man was indifferent to his status as a father. The third teen parent in our sample was a young woman whose child had been taken into care and who wanted the child back. These are three very different individual responses to an apparently similar circumstance.

Likewise, the young people who were drug users or who had been drug users had very different attitudes towards drugs, from showing no desire to quit through to working very hard to come off drugs. The following are some examples of attitudes to drugs. The first comment is from a young woman who had been a heroin user:

> I started using drugs at a young age because I been in care most of my life and I been through a lot. I seen a lot—I seen my best friend get murdered. I got pretty messed up so I started drugs and on to hard drugs…because I thought it would take everything away but it didn't it—made it worse. And I'm getting myself better now so I'm all clean. So my life's getting good.

This young woman talked openly about her 'habit' and how she felt the need to help others not to follow what she did. She was keen to highlight for others in the group the futility of taking heroin. She stated that she would like other young people to hear her story to try to persuade them against making the choices she did. She openly gave advice to one of the young men in the group.

Another young man also admitted being a drug user in the past: 'I used to run around mad popping valium'. However, he made a distinction between soft drug users and their activities and the behaviour of hard drug users: 'Down here you've got a lot of junkies. We don't jump old women, we don't go out and jag up, we don't rob houses'.

One danger in identifying groups is that solutions will be proposed to deal with young people as groups rather than as individuals. The young people who were part of this study had different characteristics, circumstances and behaviours. Tackling their lack of involvement in education, training or employment requires, in our view,

individual responses that acknowledge their particular range of difficulties. This finding and recommendation of our study is to some extent validated by the Nuffield/Rathbone *Engaging youth enquiry* (2008). They report: 'The so called NEET group is in fact very diverse and young people who are in different circumstances may all be classified together in this 'group' (p. 5) and recommend, as we do, 'a tailored case-specific response to the particular needs of every individual' (p. 5).

School exclusion policies and practices

Having been excluded from school, often on multiple occasions, was a common experience of the young people in our study. It seems to us that it will be rather difficult to get young people to remain in education or formal training beyond 16 if for much of their schooling pre-16 they have been excluded. Eleven of the 19 young people on whom we had detailed information reported that they had a poor record of schooling and that this often included multiple exclusions. The range of experiences and views of the young people with whom we worked were similar in many ways to the young people Pomeroy (2000) interviewed for her research.

One of our participants reflected on her school experience suggesting that there were problems on both sides:

> In school I got chucked out because I was causing trouble. I wish I did stick in with my education. I don't have concentration. I wish they could make the lessons more interesting and give you longer breaks. I wish I had stuck in—it was my own fault. I was at a point I was really going downhill. I just don't want to use my head.

The idea of problems at and with school being a combination of personal attitudes and behaviours and also factors related to teacher attitudes and behaviours was reflected in the following account from a young man:

> Some teachers and I got on well and I trusted them but some I wouldn't…Some teachers are stuck up—they think they're better than you because they've got a career in teaching or something like that—they think, 'Oh, look what we're doing', look down their nose at you and I'm just like…'we're still at school—how do you know we're never going to get that place you've got?'
>
> That's basically school because stuff happened there, getting excluded, not getting on with teachers and stuff like that…God I got into trouble a hell of a lot.
>
> If somebody's got an attitude towards me I'll make a bigger attitude towars them…see if they're not shouting but raising their voice, I start screaming, just about you're not away to bring me down—I'll bring you down. Like some people say they hurt teachers with chairs and things, I wouldn't do that. I'd make them feel bad about themselves, at least that's what I used to do, I used to make them feel that small—if you try to do it to me I'll do it worse to you. People try to play mind games with me, I'll play it worse with them, ken, like make you feel small in front of everyone, they made you like real small, I ken I'm only a wee guy but I ken things to make you feel bad, so I used to bring them down. It's quite a shame on some of them, there was one of them, it was a shame—I felt bad after it. He was a French teacher, he got the 'Mick' took right out of him and he'd know it, I used to be dead bad in his class and was put on a behaviour card and he'd do it, and now I go, oh my God, I'd say you'll dae as I tell you, that's me saying it to him, right, he'd say, ok.

> He must have felt overpowered—there were that many in the class they were all bad behaved. Now I'm thinking, how could you dae that to somebody? In fourth year I was dead sorry an' everything I was a little shit and he was ok, ok, and I said, no, it wasn't really, you must have been pure scared or something, it was such a shame—that was the only teacher I felt bad about doing something to.

This young man was later awarded an Outstanding Young Scot award for his work mentoring younger teenagers. In the context of school he was, in his own words, 'a little shit', yet in another context an outstanding example of a young person. The authority structure of schooling did not suit him.

Exclusion from school seems to occur for a variety of reasons and it may be short- or longer-term. The average temporary exclusion in Scotland is three days. In extreme cases permanent exclusion (removal from register) from a particular school may be deemed necessary.

Clearly, in cases of violence, either against teachers or other pupils, measures need to be taken to protect those who are the victims of the violence and to ensure good order in the school. We, like Pomeroy, found cases where the young people admitted to violent behaviour but, also like her, we had reported to us instances where the young people felt unfairly treated or where they felt they were labelled by family association as potential trouble makers.

One young man had been in five schools before being put in secure accommodation. He was excluded on multiple occasions for assaulting staff. One of the young women claimed that the school connected her too much to her triplet brother who also had behaviour problems, but that 'just because we're related doesn't mean we're the same'. She did say, though, that they were close. Her brother was expelled from school and had since been involved in several programmes and courses.

Schools are supposed to ensure that the education of pupils continues while they are excluded. This can be very difficult to achieve in cases where, as with many of the young people in our study, family support is limited. Our research indicated continuing practices of excluding young people into a vacuum of no alternative provision. This finding is supported by Scottish Government statistics. In 2006/2007, of the 44,546 temporary exclusions, no alternative provision was made in 38,050 cases (85%) and of the 248 removals from register no long-term alternative provision was made in 61 cases (25%) (Scottish Government, 2008).

The five authorities with the highest rates of exclusion per 1000 pupils are among the seven authority areas identified as 'NEET hotspots'. This, of course, does not mean that high rates of exclusion cause later NEET status, since other factors such as deprivation may be linking both phenomena. Excluding pupils in the compulsory stages of education can be incompatible with high expectations of their continued engagement in later years.

The myth of low aspirations

The hopes and aspirations of these young people were relatively 'normal'. They wanted what most people want: a settled life with a steady partner, a job, a home and

possibly children. Many of their career aspirations were modest and achievable with the right support. The quotations below are from nine of the young people and represent all four research sites:

> I'd like to have money and keep it to myself. I'd like to be a cleaner. (Young woman)
>
> I don't want to get my hopes up because I'll be disappointed if I don't get it. (Young man)
>
> …a good career. (Young man)
>
> I'd like to be an air hostess. I want to make something of my life. I start off doing travel and tourism at college for about a year. Next year I hope to go to college. I'm good with people. If someone is really quiet or someone really loud I just talk to them. I'm a really sociable person. To be an air hostess is my dream and I'm going to do my best to get there. (Young woman)

One young man was very forthcoming about his collage (which took a bit of sensitive working but once he got going…especially away from everyone else). He was able to articulate his thoughts about his past, present and future and, for example, to note quite simple aspirations such as finding a partner and raising what could only be described as a traditional family.

He put the greatest effort of all the group members into the collage exercise. He described his collage. The person standing by himself he said was him in the past and that that represented how he felt when he was on drugs. He had some pictures of alcohol and cigarette rolling papers because he drank and smoked dope, but he hoped he could stop this too, 'to get [his] life back'. He pasted a picture of a car, which he hoped he could have, and a picture of a pair of football boots, which represented taking his future kids out to play football. He hoped he would be able to buy his kids all the things they wanted and dreamt of having his own house.

Another young man's father was a landscaper and he was interested in following in the same profession. He was certain that his dad would be able to secure him a job when the time came. He said that after he returned from his family summer holiday to Florida, he would be ready to start working. He said working is all about money rather than job satisfaction. He also said he would consider opening his own business. He would never consider doing charity work.

Yet another young man spoke of the freedom that being able to drive and having a car would bring:

> I'm 17 next February and I can't wait to get a car and do my driving test/lessons soon, soon as I'm able to…the fact that having a car and you're just able to go and drive anywhere you want, when you want, just as long as you've got petrol, just like freedom. Ah, it would be great, and if you've got worries or anything, get away on your own whenever you want, work them out yourself…and the big question mark because I'm only 16.

Some of the dreams expressed by the young people were influenced by the media and the exposure these young people had to television and its associated role models: 'My dream is to go on a show called "Balls of Steel"' (young man), 'I wanna be a professional footballer…I play it on a Wednesday' (young man), 'Want to be a professional footballer. My dream is to go to Amsterdam' (young man).

However, many of the young people—including the same ones who expressed over-aspirational dreams—also related hopes of work and family. These were in the main realistic and achievable goals and often reflected where they could achieve security, support or opportunity that had been absent in their own lives:

> I wanna have children, when I'm a bit older. (Young man)
>
> One day I'd like to have a family of mine. (Young man)
>
> Want to open up a shop. Don't know what kind of shop, just a shop to make money. (Young man)
>
> Go for a good job if I can. If I get a job I'll stick to it, work as hard as I can. I want to get a good career in boat building. Stuck to that, still working on it. Got a boat, hope to get it out this summer. (Young man)

The need to tackle low aspirations was not an issue that applied to those young people who participated in our research.

Conclusion

This paper will end as it started, with a consideration of the life and future of Davie. It should be apparent from the report our work provided above that there are no quick-fix solutions to the problems of young people like Davie who are socially and economically disengaged. Their problems are wide-ranging and include housing, drugs, parenting, alcohol and offending behaviour. These are not issues that can be dealt with wholly in the education or training sector or that can be dealt with when young people reach the age of 16. Davie's problems started in the family home before he even left primary school. Nor is the issue solely about lack of skills. Several of the young people in our study, including Davie, had picked up a range of skills often supported by qualifications but were still unable to find work locally because of a lack of opportunities.

It is our view, based on this research, that when those who deal with youth policy describe young people as having low aspirations they mean low expectations. The young people in our study had normal aspirations but sometimes low expectations. Their expectations were soundly based on their empirical observations of the life chances of people like them. Their expectations were thus rational. It may be that when policy makers use a discourse of low aspirations they are placing the problem on the young people. A very positive aspect of recent Scottish Government discourse is the descriptor of young people in need of more choices and more chances. This could be seen as the government and its agencies taking responsibility for providing young people in Scotland who are currently marginalised with more choices of options for education, employment and training and more opportunities to reach their aspirations.

Our research showed that these opportunities need to be tailored to meet individual needs. There needs to be more choice in terms of the range of alternative provision open to young people who are currently being repeatedly excluded from school. Some

of the provision that was available to the young people we worked with was in the non-formal or voluntary sector. Youth workers and advisors in these sectors seemed to be able to develop the kind of close, supportive relationships with young people that are difficult to develop in secondary schools because of the structures and numbers involved in the latter.

As Scotland moves to a situation where the learning and work careers of young people may be tracked with the expectation of continued involvement in some form of education, training or work, then the range of choices and chances will need to reflect the circumstances of all young people.

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Note

1. These figures refer to the total number of young people who engaged with us at some time during the three days of research with each group. We do not have detailed data from all of these young people but wish to recognise their contribution.

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