Only connect with the real world

The Executive's top priority for education is closing the gap between successful pupils and those it labels 'disaffected'. Disengaged learners certainly need a champion as they are challenging, frustrating and badly understood. Some of our deepest prejudices lead us to construe their problems as self-inflicted and so they don't evoke much sympathy. The view that non-participation is the fault of the disengaged is unhelpful. Any service enterprise that blamed its market for a lack of business wouldn't last long. In stark contrast, Nike's huge success is based on their belief that everyone who has a body is an athlete. Current rhetoric puts the individual pupil at the centre, but in reality it is the young person who has to change. And this begs the question, is the second gap we need to close the one between rhetoric and reality?

Many pupils become increasingly disengaged from secondary as a result of curricular irrelevance and overload and insufficient differentiation. While the child-centred primary engages pupils, pupils have to engage with the teacher-centred secondary. In secondary there is more teacher control, more public evaluation and emphasis on ability. There is also less choice, support and clarity about classroom life. The pressure to chase higher standards has left many teachers feeling controlled by rather than in control of the curriculum. They often downloaded this stress to pupils via fraught classroom climates. The achievement agenda has also given the high moral ground to those teachers who see their job as teaching subjects rather than pupils.

Teachers encourage pupils in top sections to work independently and allow them some choice and responsibility. But they structure lower sections more tightly and give them fewer opportunities for independent learning and creativity. Some teachers think, like doctors with poor bedside manners, they have little responsibility for creating the climate that engages pupils in learning. One head teacher told me recently some of his staff want to be FE lecturers rather than teachers. When disengaged learners meet disengaged teachers even more restricted methods and content can result. Some teachers complain about disengaged pupils but then resent any special treatment given to them, seeing it as rewarding bad behaviour.

For some pupils, it is difficult to find any hook to engage them in learning, like trying to find the start of a roll of tape. The answer might partially lie in the Executive's encouragement to schools to offer a range of learning opportunities that can be delivered in a variety of settings to meet individual needs. Rather than imposing yet more traditional learning on the seemingly reluctant, alternative approaches can be shaped around pupils' goals and 'real life' experiences and challenges. New higher still courses such as Cooking with Confidence and Food Preparation look promising as they are more practical and relevant for some pupils than standard grade courses. The search for a hook may need to be within a new medium. Outward bound for example can provide novel challenges, intense relationships, close group identity, trust and the discovery of unrealised strengths. Drama, through peer affirmation and high-energy situations that offer trust and

intimacy, can provide pupils with the emotional security and voice to express their feelings. In a similar way dance releases endorphins, gets the heart rate up, promotes energy and so creates the bodies' natural high. Enterprise education has an immediate attraction because of its real life connections. Computers provide a competitive but private therefore low threat climate where engagement is unconditional. They allow pupils to be in control and less reliant on teachers. Stimulation is provided through small achievable targets. Computers offer feedback that is not only instant and individualised but is consistent, objective and, unlike much teacher feedback, non-judgemental.

Schools transform the lives of many young people but our education system could have even more impact. Those pupils with transient difficulties should be sustainable in classrooms with support. However by 14 some pupils have had such a history of disengagement that they need a change of scene if they are to progress to further training or employment. Such pupils need learning contexts that start from and build on their interests and goals, provide as few obstacles and threats as possible and give purpose to their learning. Such contexts need to be connected to something that tunes into their own sub-culture.

Many young people are keen to learn but not in formal classrooms. Given the right opportunities and channelled interests they can thrive in transitional programmes where they are given space to mature at their own pace. They respond to being treated in a more informal way, to being given a chance to access different environments, engage in alternative learning styles and experience the value of work. Schools need to take the time to discover pupils' 'signature' strengths and to find the best niche for them to use these qualities to the full rather than fix their shortcomings. This would allow pupils' identities to be defined by their strengths not their deficiencies. They would then graduate from rather than be dispatched or disappear from formal education. So perhaps the biggest gap we need to close is the one between schools and the world of work, Further Education and Training.

Schooling has become too complex in our relentless drive for higher achievement and we have forgotten about the basic needs of our young people. Pupils need to be valued by teachers, surrounded by a cohesive peer group and given a sense of belonging and control, the stimulation of real life learning and recognition for whatever they achieve. As long as the driving force is excellence in certain prescribed skills we will celebrate success in these skills and ignore progress in other areas. But the way schools label talent doesn't always represent the real world. A nation of lifelong learners requires accredited learning to include activities that are connected with all pupils' lives and interests. Perhaps future league tables could measure pupils' feelings of engagement and self-improvement in skills that are important to them.

What needs to be done to improve pupil motivation? Every teacher will have an opinion on that. Well the Scottish Parliament's Education Committee has just concluded their inquiry into this question and has

given their answer in a valuable and accessible 'snapshot overview' that captures both the importance and pervasiveness of motivation. The committee wisely resist the temptation to prescribe a national policy to address issues that 'stem from the complex interactions between individual psychology, the relationship between teacher and pupil, peer group interactions and the link between school and the outside world."

The most innovative and potentially transforming as well as most contentious recommendation is that schools should seek pupil feedback on how motivating they find their classrooms. Motivation is a two way process and pupils impact on teacher morale so the sooner they are brought into the loop the better. Pupils have much to say on this issue from their "lived in" perspective of classrooms. This means creating a climate where pupil opinion is truly valued and where leadership is distributed throughout classrooms as well as staff rooms.

The report encourages the Executive to emphasise the importance of education, including vocational and academic outcomes. Given that the commercial world spends much more on advertising than the state does on education I wonder how powerful government really is. An obsession with outcomes can also be counterproductive. There is a danger of losing sight of learning for its own sake, curiosity, fun and enjoyment. Evidence from the uptake of adult learning has indicated that interest is more important than outcome and that it was pressure over outcomes in their formative years that turned many adults off learning.

The report doesn't suggest any easy solutions and openly acknowledges that there will inevitably be tensions, for example between the need for greater academic achievement and the wish to lighten the assessment and examination load. Any teacher resistance to the current traunch of initiatives is not so much to do with workload but more probably a result of uncertainty over whether or not the new zeitgeist is for real, or will schools still be judged solely on attainment.

This Inquiry will have been worthwhile if it is used as a platform to further address the paradoxes permeating education. Firstly the plethora of initiatives designed to improve pupil motivation is in danger of doing the reverse by denting teacher morale. The open ended nature of trying to achieve children's potential in combination with the continuous quest for improvement is a recipe for stress. By constantly increasing aspirations, the system makes satisfaction almost impossible. Every new initiative becomes a potential burden particularly if it doesn't take into account the culture of schools or connect with their central mission. The current ideology, like every ideology is an apparently impartial line presented as the natural way of things. I'm perplexed at the unquestioning acceptance of the capacities in the Curriculum for Excellence, based on the questionable assumption that all children want to be model citizens.

Secondly initiatives to raise motivation are often outsourced to private and voluntary organisations by schools abdicating territory that is fundamentally theirs. They need to re-claim this and put motivation at the heart of what they are about.

In the third paradox we have A Curriculum for Excellence pointing towards pupil responsibility while practice is encouraging dependency in children. To raise achievement the education system is hyperactively spoon-feeding children who consequently fail to assume responsibility for constructing their own learning. Pupils come to school with the mindset that the teacher must control and entertain as well as teach them, and so they will taunt probationers coming to terms with this challenge. As one head teacher suggested to me recently - schools are places where young people go to watch old people work. Motivation is not a quality of the learner but a transaction between the learner and the context. We need to think hard about when and how classrooms started nurturing this over dependency.

The Report pinpoints how the value of education has been eroded in recent times leading to the increasing polarisation between improving and 'stuck' groups. It doesn't however try to explain this. My own view is that sections of society have so little sense of personal responsibility for their lives that they don't recognise or see a way out of this culture of learned helplessness. The connected issue of pupils needing to take responsibility is mentioned but needs further developed. We really need to harness methodologies that nurture pupil responsibility including Personal Learning Planning and Assessment is for Learning.

The fourth paradox is about how society expects schools to socialize pupils to believe in their personal rights and individuality, despite the collective nature of school life where most teachers rarely have any opportunities to interact with individual pupils.

The report underlines the need for different strategies to engage different pupils. The biggest challenge to schools in motivating pupils is that they are all different. I'm not sure however if there is a full appreciation at any level in education of the range of what I call ' Learning Stances ' within any one class and how big a challenge this really is for teachers. There is much work to be done on clarifying the key differences between pupils and developing the capacity of schools to tune into and respond to these differences.

The fifth paradox is that pupils want to be treated the same. But equality that doesn't recognise differences is demoralising and unfair. Teachers need to treat pupils according to their needs so we need to find ways to help pupils to understand that they have different needs.

Teaching is a privileged position that touches the lives of children. However teachers, like emotions, are never in neutral and can impact either positively or negatively. Teachers can sometimes treat pupils rigidly on their terms and then get caught up in the behavioural backlash. Motivating pupils requires reflective rather than reactive teaching. This is what makes the reflective practitioner so successful.