
Mental health, well-being and school leaving

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Early school leaving is a global problem which is very worrying. It can be found in all the countries over the world, even in big economies like the US (William, 2018, p. 5). Research has shown that high school dropout rates are not only common in the US but that this is a problem of many other countries (Smith & Thomson, 2014). This is also a phenomenon of the European Union where countries on the Mediterranean littoral and in the East, are the most prone to this problem. A high rate of early school leaving has vast implications on the future of the country itself. There are economic, social, educational and also health repercussions to be faced later on. William (2018) cites the problem of the US, where those who are early school leavers earn less than college graduates. This in turn, leads to a lifetime of poverty.

This reinforces arguments that pupils' progress at secondary school has life-changing consequences for the students' future social mobility (Crawford, Coldron, Jones, & Simkins, 2014). Exam attainment at the end of Year 11 has a profound impact on entry to higher education and on later outcomes such as earning potential in the labour market (Blanden, Greaves, Gregg, Macmillan, & Sibieta, 2015). Thus, the situation where individuals do not finish their high school education is preoccupying for all countries. These dropouts will form part of a work-force which is ill-prepared to face the challenges of the future. The job opportunities of these youth are limited and thus in the future, they might end jobless and unable to care for themselves and their families. This results in a lifetime relying on social benefits.

In order to tackle the early school leaving problem, many countries have sought to offer more educational experiences to youth who might be disenfranchised from the mainstream setting. This type of education is known as alternative education and it can take place anywhere other than in the normal school setting. Alternative education is made up of a wide range of forms of educations. Yet, this form of education represents according to Kizel (2016) a challenge to the foundations of the regular, traditional,

conservative and state education. These types of alternative establishments cater for a wide array of students who are of compulsory school age. These include those with behaviour problems, single mothers, those who have given up on the academic pathway, those facing abuse, and others who have a chaotic life at home. Such a variety of categories requires different programmes of alternative education provisions, commonly referred to as alternative education programmes (AEPs).

Unfortunately, as these types of provisions are meant to deal with youths facing social problems, schools providing such type of specialised education are seen as dumping place where to put students with behaviour problems. It is very important that alternative education programmes should not be considered as such. They must be another route to getting a qualification at the end of secondary school. Educational leaders should understand that not all students have the same aims or the same ways of learning, neither do all students have the same social and economic background. Also, not everyone have the same health issues, and some students are more vulnerable to such problems, than others. In the past four years that I have been researching alternative education, I have been concerned about the economic, social and educational causes which lead these students to go down this path. Through a qualitative study, I have researched the perceptions of students and educational professionals about the differences between learning in an alternative setting and a mainstream setting. I sought the opinions of boys and girls who attend these institutions. I also delved into detail by getting both the students' and professionals' perspectives, of whether the students' social and family backgrounds affect their choice to follow their education at an alternative education provision. It is important to find answers to these questions, as then one has a snapshot of what the cohort of students and educational professionals, who work in this field, deem as being important for the emotional and social well-being of these students. This can help psychosocial teams in schools and colleges to better address the problems of those who are vulnerable and who are at risk of ending up on the margins of society.

Research has yielded that the majority of the students who attend alternative learning provisions are boys. Boys seem to pose a problem in the way of conformity in a mainstream setting and this has been a source of research in literature as to why boys drop out of school or are found in bigger number in alternative education provisions. Boys are more prone to be excluded than girls. In fact, the figure stands at three times more likely to be excluded than girls. Researchers have also looked into the dominant cultures of masculinity and how these influence boys' negative attitudes towards school. Boys adopt 'macho' masculinities that equate schoolwork to females. Thus, for many boys, school work is an inferior activity that is not suitable for men (Francis, 2000; Frosh, Phoenix, & Pattman, 2002, p. 10–16). These studies reinforced what was found by Epstein et al. The latter discovered that for many working-class boys, schoolwork is anti-masculine and not for real boys (Epstein, 1998, p. 5).

My initial findings are that students who attend these institutions, irrespective of gender, do better if they attend out of their own free will. This is consistent with what Raywid (1994) stated, that students should attend voluntarily. Furthermore, my studies are confirming that students who end up attending such a provision need to be understood and catered for and they do have needs which the mainstream school did not cater for. The school can help by providing them a flexible curriculum which is related to their needs. This was also confirmed by Wiliam (2018: p.178) who writes that: 'the focus on adapting instruction to meet student needs appears to be especially important'. Some of the students I interviewed recounted how they were bullied in mainstream school, many come from broken families where importance to education is not given. Others spoke of their health issues or those hitting close family members. In many cases, the guardians of such students have a low level of schooling, with many being employed in very basic menial jobs. Many blamed themselves for attending an AEP. My research also matches with the study carried out by Lumby (2013). She found that young people partially admitted that it was their fault that they were estranged from learning a school. Some said that they had not tried enough, others blamed their moodiness. Others admitted that they found it difficult to control their anger. Students who do not feel successful at school and see themselves as a burden on the class,

are more likely to simply stop attending school (Smith & Thomson, 2014) and thus become early school leavers.

To keep students engaged, Harper and colleagues (2011), and Biesta (2014) emphasised the need for small classes as these provide for a more personalised teaching and engagement from students. This is considered beneficial for those categories of students who drop out because of disenchantment with school or the learning environment. Malcolm (2018) also gives a list of things which are needed for an AEP to be successful. These are the deep relationships between the students and their teachers, staff working to cater for the individual needs of each young person, reciprocal respect and the personalisation of learning. Malcolm also mentions the fact that students in an alternative education provision undertake practical and vocational learning and that they have a job exposure. These are all seen as positive characteristics, which can help students with problems to flourish. Consequently, for students to thrive in an alternative setting, a lot of support should be given. A way to create this support is when teachers support their students holistically and respect them (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006). Research has shown that school staff has an important influential role to play for those at risk of academic, social and emotional failure (Werner, 2000, p. 115). It is imperative that the staff in an alternative programme should treat students fairly and with respect. As stated by Powell in 2003: 'Adults must believe that at-risk students have the ability to change.' Such students need to be supported, and consequently, they will do better both in their behaviour and academically (Edgar-Smith & Baugher Palmer, 2015). The results of the study also showed that the students improved academically. A relationship with one adult is enough: 'When students make a lasting connection with at least one caring adult, it appears they invest in school such that academic and personal outcomes improve' (Edgar-Smith & Baugher Palmer, 2015).

Students thrive in a school which has a favourable culture. If students feel engaged, respected and well cared for, they will be motivated. In other words, students attend school if they do not feel insecure or receive poor treatment. Thus, as I have shown further up, it is important that there is a good relationship between staff and students (Le Cornu & Collins 2004; Mooij, Smeets, & de Wit, 2011). Thus, students placed in an alternative education provision must have caring teachers, a positive and supportive learning environment, and a small student–teacher ratio. Parents and guardians, whenever possible, should also be involved as their cooperation with the school is beneficial to the students themselves and may offset the negative experiences of the participants' environment prior to entering an alternative education programme. Only through cooperation and respect between all stakeholders can the physical and mental well-being of these vulnerable members of society be assured.

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