

The author was not prepared for the extent to which non-academic issues intruded into the pupils' lives.

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Preparing for the GCSE: doing justice to themselves

Many pupils face personal problems and crises during school years 10 and 11 that are not 'academic' in origin, in the sense that they are not linked to their subject studies.

This is suggested by the results of my recent research project. There are clear implications that such difficulties do have a definite effect on examination performance. Questionnaire evidence also shows that substantial majorities of pupils would like counselling help to be available during their GCSE years.

From July 1995 to September 1996 I tracked more than 800 pupils in six Midlands schools through their Year 11, using interviews, questionnaires, diaries, and group discussion methods. The sample included three large comprehensive schools, two single-sex selectives (one girls' and one boys'), and an independent mixed grammar school. The methods involved included:

- Sixty one-to-one tape-recorded interviews, ranging in length from 20 to 40 minutes and transcribed in note form, which were completed between March and June 1996.
- Three 'across-the-board' questionnaires, with typically 680–750 respondents, which were administered during the academic year. A fourth was given to pupils in September/October 1996, when the return dropped to 336 because of leavers.
- Other activities involved small 'research groups' of between four and 12 pupils in each school, who undertook diaries for part of the year and recorded written opinions following group discussions.

Substantial majorities of pupils would like counselling help.

Out of 60 pupils interviewed, 32 had at least one non-academic problem that could affect their studies.

The project deliberately aimed to mix quantitative and qualitative methods in the hope that the more personalised approaches would qualify the survey suggestions.

Personal problems

Thirty boys and the same number of girls were interviewed. My initial brief for the project had been to investigate the sources of pressures on pupils created by the GCSE, and, naturally enough, a number of school-based and work-related difficulties emerged.

However, what I was not prepared for was the extent to which issues that had nothing to do with GCSE subject studies intruded into pupils' lives during this time. Of the 60 pupils, 32 had a total of 42 problems that could reasonably be assumed to have had an effect upon their studies because of the loss of time, motivation, or concentration they would be likely to involve. Three categories of problem represent the range that the interviews revealed.

(1) Death or illness

There was a total of 22 problems or crises in this group.

Personal illness Only four of them were about the pupils' own illnesses (including three cases of glandular fever and one of tonsillitis). One of the doctors involved had attributed the illness to the stress of the examination period.

Bereavement Six cases were concerned with the death of a relative during the pupils' years 10 or 11, including four grandparent cases, one involving both grandparents, and two uncles. One further crisis concerned a girl

whose best friend's father had recently committed suicide, and who felt that she was bearing the brunt of the situation without any dispensations being applicable to her case.

Domestic problems The remaining 11 cases in this group included seven that were directly about the continuing illness of a relative, and four that were the indirect consequence of such situations, such as the need to look after siblings when parents were making frequent visits to another part of the country to visit a sick relation, and the necessity of living with an unfamiliar parent when the other parent was hospitalised, many years after a divorce.

A great variety of problems were discovered.

(2) Family relationships

There were nine of these, and only one, a case where a boy was struggling to maintain his privacy and concentration with three younger brothers in the house, was not connected with pupils' relationships with their parents. The problems included a father losing his job, a father having increasing difficulties at work for various reasons, a stalemate of perpetual conflict with a mother, parents in the throes of a divorce, a case where the pupil concerned had actually left home because of conflict with parents, and a situation where the pupil had lost a lot of time because of leaving the house during parents' arguments. The remaining dual problem was a combination of a split marriage and the mother's very demanding occupation.

(3) Other problems

Eleven cases remained. Five of these concerned the ending of long-lasting relationships with girlfriends or boyfriends, two involved truancy because of anti-school feelings, and one was a particularly bad case of bullying which the pupil had endured for nine months before going to the group tutor. The last three included a part-time job commitment undertaken because of the family's financial needs, a substantial loss of Year 10 time and work because of a personal crisis, and a pupil whose mother's work as a child-minder — sometimes lasting until eight at night — created problems with work and concentration.

Problems and GCSE grades

When the examination results were available, I divided the interviewees into groups according to how many GCSE points (8 for an A*, 7 for an A, etc.) they obtained.

- Fourteen pupils amassed over 60 points and shared five of the problems described between them.
- Fifteen pupils finished with fewer than 40 points and 13 of them had at least one problem.

Those with least points also shared work-related characteristics such as the lack of specific revision programmes, but I feel it is easier to accept that the non-academic problems create the work deficiencies rather than the reverse.

Pre-GCSE: Investigating 'academic' problems

Questionnaire 2 investigated GCSE 'problems and solutions' and had a total return of 678 pupils.

- *Feeling worried or anxious all the time* was a problem or a big problem for 45.1% of respondents.
- More specifically, *having to look after a sick relative* was a problem or a big problem for 11.6%.
- *Having to put up with bullying at school* was a problem or a big problem for 13.1%.

In the 'solutions' section, 53.3% voted *yes* and 32.4% voted *maybe* to the idea of a teacher-counsellor for one-to-one discussions in confidence, and the boys were only a few percentage points behind the girls on this item.

Post-GCSE: A vote for the teacher-counsellor

The final questionnaire was completed after the examination period, in September 1996. The return dropped to 336 because of the numbers leaving school; 279 of the respondents were now 6th-formers and starting on A-level studies — in other words, they had been relatively successful in their examinations.

In response to a suggestion that pupils should have access to teacher-counsellors in Year 11 if personal crises arose during GCSE year, a total of 89.2% felt that this was *important* or *very important*, with 49.1% choosing the latter.

While there were some variations between the schools and the genders, with a general tendency for the selective schools and the boys to place less emphasis on the need for counselling help, the differences never amounted to double-figure percentage points. In common with other subjects covered by the project, there

'Feeling worried or anxious all the time' was a big problem.

was a remarkable degree of agreement amongst the age group.

Other studies of the 'GCSE year'

In view of the obvious relevance of the subject for schools, parents, and pupils, the information available on the effects of GCSE pressures on pupils seems extraordinarily meagre.

Relationships or studies?

Kyriacou & Butcher (1993) found that teachers believed the main source of stress amongst Year 11 girls was appearance and relationships with boyfriends, when in fact, according to the pupils themselves, it was examinations.

Active or passive?

Robson et al. (1995, p. 173), referring to ways of helping children manage stress, conclude that the only meaningful way to intervene in the stress process is to help individuals explore the meaning that an event has for them and empower them to facilitate change. However, this does not sound promising in view of the fact that many pupils were reluctant to discuss their problems in school and seemed to see themselves as passive recipients of whatever was decided for them rather than as effective agents of change.

Home-school problems

Johnson, referring to 'trauma in the lives of children', suggests that studies of adolescent alcohol and drug abuse, runaways and serious school attendance problems show each to be positively correlated with incidents from the three thematic areas of critical incidents: family pathology, victimisation, and loss (Johnson, 1989, p. 31), a categorisation which seems to include most of the problems identified earlier.

This link between problems at home and at school is further supported by substance-abuse evidence (Robins & McEvoy, 1990, p. 182) with a higher likelihood of substance abuse.

Bigger than examinations?

It would seem that the kinds of problems which Year 11 pupils are experiencing are those which could have consequences up to and a good way beyond impaired school performance, with some pupils locked into a 'vicious circle' effect that is not helped by their total powerlessness in and out of school.

Some problems could have consequences beyond impaired school performance.

Two certificates to recognise special interests and ability.

Is it the school's business?

Many teachers believe that there is a limit to what is the school's business, and many schools would maintain that they cannot possibly afford to have trained counsellors on hand if there is no work for them to do. The present reluctance of pupils to talk about their problems at school would obviously make this more likely.

But I would suggest that it is clearly in the interests of schools to do something about these problems, and there are four feasible and practical possibilities that do not take the school into unwelcome territory:

1. Investigate what could be done in terms of 'peer counselling', using people who have recently completed the GCSE year, such as 6th-formers or ex-pupils.

2. Give two or three Year 10 and 11 staff a counselling function, possibly arranging pastoral time when they can be available, and choosing them either on the basis of counselling qualifications, by pupil vote of the whole year, or by a pupil council.

3. Include a unit on dealing with such problems in the Year 11 PSE or pastoral programme, and ensure that pupils know they have options available and people they can talk to.

4. Talk to national and local counselling organisations with a view to arranging visits to schools and helping with future counselling activities.

Certificating non-academic achievement

I would also like to mention two items that are wider and more far-reaching.

A school certificate

The first idea is that schools could establish their own School or Pastoral Certificate, using as a basis the present Records of Achievement procedures, but expanding them in two ways. Firstly, the certificate could include grades relating to practical subjects covered in pastoral time. Secondly, it could include all the pupil's extra-curricular activities and achievements. With these ingredients, the certificate would be a valuable testimonial for future use, and would encourage pupils to get involved in areas where they have interest and ability, academic or otherwise.

A national Practical Certificate (PCE)

The second proposal is to establish a Practical Certificate of Education, parallel to the GCSE and expanding the previous suggestion into a fuller and more externally-moderated provision. The PCE could embrace PE, speech and drama, music, and award-scheme activities, in addition to other subjects not usually covered in the practical curriculum, as in the suggested school certificate above. The PCE would also go some of the way towards satisfying demands for a greater vocational content in the curriculum.

A helping hand

My evidence suggests that the GCSE year is challenging even for pupils whose difficulties are entirely subject-based. For too many, extra pressure is piled on to the extent where they can fall at the first adult hurdle, sometimes never to recover, which is in no one's interests. Providing timely and practical help makes a lot of sense from both moral and pragmatic points of view.

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