



Hope for the Disengaged: An alternative education experience at Newlands Junior College, Glasgow

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February 2018

For Scotland's learners, with Scotland's educators

Aims

This enquiry examines the reasons for the success of Newlands Junior College (NJC) as a radical approach, at least in terms of the Scottish Secondary School system, to the problems of disengagement from the educational process that lead to negative post-school destinations. In turn these negative destinations can lead, almost inevitably, to economic dependence and a failure to realise potential and find fulfillment in life.

Focus

Since NJC students are nominated from schools in which they have been unsuccessful and were disengaging, despite having potential, they constitute a significant group upon which the important questions of this study are primarily focused. Their opinions and views about their education are sought in an evaluative way using questionnaires and interviews.

The students' carers have an acute perspective on school effectiveness. They, too, are included.

Aspects of the governance of NJC are examined in a comparative sense.

Focus Questions

1. Why is NJC successful in re-engaging the disengaged?
2. What makes NJC so successful in getting positive destinations for graduates?
3. Do NJC students find the experience differs from mainstream school and how?
4. How do NJC students feel about NJC compared to their previous school(s)?
5. What reasons do students identify for their successes at NJC?
6. How do carers view NJC provision?
7. What difference do carers see in the students?

Introduction

Since comprehensivisation in 1965, Scottish education has become characterised by uniformity. Nationwide, it seems the concept of 'entitlement' now means that all pupils have the same experiences from a curriculum model that is almost identical.

Many do not fit and disengagement may result through lack of motivation, sporadic attendance, behavioural issues and poor levels of attainment. Standard national data (Tables 1 and 2 below) indicates the scale of the problem.

Negative destinations – unemployment and unknown – might indicate disengagement levels. Disengaged pupils are less likely to access a positive destination because of educational or personal factors.

Table 1: School Leavers and Negative Destinations (Summary Statistics for Attainment, Leaver Destinations and Healthy Living No 7)

Year	No. of School Leavers	Negative Destinations - Initial Measure (September)		Negative Destinations - Follow-up Measure (Spring)	
		Number	Percentage of Cohort	Number	Percentage of Cohort
2009-10	53,134	6,901	13%	8,004	14.8%
2015-16	52,305	4,500	6.7%	4,667	8.6%

Table 1 shows a significant problem. Too many leavers fail to get a positive destination and may be heading towards a life of economic dependency.

The level of qualifications amongst graduates is examined. (Table 2).

Table 2: School Leavers and Qualification Levels (Summary Statistics for Attainment, Leaver Destinations and Healthy Living No 7)

Year	No. of School Leavers	No. with no Qualifications	Percentage of Cohort	Number with at least 1 qualification at Level 3 (the basic level)	Percentage of Cohort
2009-10	53,134	1,488	2.8%	1,488	2.8%
2015-16	52,305	1,046	2%	899	1.7%

That so many school leavers have zero or minimal qualifications, is untenable. The chances of their getting a job or a place in further education are very limited. Their lack of success may be due, in part, to disengagement.

Why do so many leavers – even those who have passed some exams - fail to get a positive destination? While Chairing Welfare to Work in Glasgow from 2003, Scottish entrepreneur Jim McColl concluded that the system fails them. In 2012 he said, “The education system we have... is suited to maybe 80 per cent of the kids at school, but there’s this 20 per cent that really kind of switch off. What we call comprehensive education is far from comprehensive.” (Johnson, 2012)

McColl envisioned combining “diverse and innovative vocationally oriented educational opportunities with rigorous academic instruction and meaningful personal development.” (Gerrard, 2012 Page 1) Students would develop “both the academic and communication skills together with the motivation and desire to gain employment.” (Gerrard, 2012 Page 10)

Newlands Junior College opened in November 2014.

Alternative Approaches

The uniqueness of NJC makes it challenging to find comparator organisations. From extensive internet searches, it seems that there is nowhere else in Scotland operating like NJC to serve the needs of its niche client group. While the students have been disengaged in the Local Authority system, they are not at the extremes of the behaviour spectrum. Young people who exhibit these extremes of behaviour would lack the capacity to meet the demands of the rigorous programme at NJC.

The closest thing to NJC may be Glasgow City Council's Enhanced Vocational Inclusion programme (EVIP). "EVIP offers young people the opportunity to study vocational qualifications in a college environment." (Glasgow City Council (2018) It begins in S3 with a part time programme where school is attended for 3 days and EVIP for 2. In S4, EVIP is full time, and young people study one vocational National qualification at Further Education college while working towards qualifications in English and Mathematics at National 3 or National 4 Level as well as National Qualifications in Employability and Wellbeing. EVIP is not a physical entity. Unlike NJC, all courses are delivered on the premises of Further Education colleges.

Outcomes of the EVIP programme have been published online albeit for 2013-14 and 2014-15. Over the two years the average Positive Destination percentage for young people completing EVIP was 63% with an improved level in the second year of 71%.

These outcomes indicate a level of success for the EVIP programme that is probably a good deal better for individuals than would have resulted had they spent S4 at school.

Widening the search to elsewhere in the UK, in England and Wales, Catch22 (2018) states that it, "Provides young people aged 4 to 18 with alternative education in order for them to progress and succeed in sustained education or employment. We do this through high quality teaching and learning based on effective relationships that enable the achievement of life skills and meaningful qualifications" (Catch22, A Social Business, 2018).

It seems that the client group is different from that of NJC in that there is specific reference to catering for young people who are permanently excluded and exhibiting challenging behaviours. As with NJC and EVIP, the curriculum is modified to meet the needs of the client group. Catch22 "includes schools" and now Academies in a Multi Academies Trust are independent schools. It describes itself as 'a social business – a not for profit business with a social mission - we have the heart of a charity, and the mindset of a business' (Catch22, A Social Business, 2018). The performance data online is limited but in 2013-14, 96% of learners went on to education, training or employment.

The Australian Industry Trade College in Queensland provides vocational education for ages 14 to 18 in two campuses and was established in 2008 by industry leaders (Australian Industry Trade College, 2018). There is a limited academic curriculum to senior standard, students also train in a trade of their choice and get help to gain employment upon graduation. Students spend only half of their time on campus; the rest is on work experience.

Like NJC, it is an independent school and is not for profit but differs in that there is no support for the fees which are up to 7,000 Australian dollars per year and the client group is quite different. There are selection tests and interviews and there is no focus on the disengaged. It is successful: In 2016, 93% of Graduates went into an apprenticeship and 96% achieved their Queensland Certificate of Education.

Clearly, alternative approaches in schools do work and do so in different parts of the world.

The Nature of NJC compared to Local Authority Secondaries

NJC was set up to be different to meet the needs of disengaged young people. Schools were failing to maintain their interest, so more of the same was not an option. To help such students succeed, an alternative was created combining diverse and innovative vocationally oriented educational opportunities with rigorous academic instruction and meaningful personal development. The curriculum differs from a Local Authority Secondary, having a greater emphasis on vocational studies, delivered by partners in Further Education, a stronger emphasis on personal development and more work experience. Core academic courses are limited to English, IT, Mathematics and Science. (Appendix 1).

Between August 2014 and NJC opening in November 2014, individual NJC staff members undertook team building. Visioning exercises focused on the desired organisational culture. A supportive and nurturing environment and a positive destination for all graduates was the goal. The notion of NJC as a big family began developing. Establishing sound, enduring positive relationships was seen as the key to success. NJC would mirror the workplace and have a positive and developmental ethos.

This size helps. NJC caters for 60 students at most, split into 2 year groups of 30. Pastoral care is important to the success of the NJC family. An adviser system has each student linked to a member of staff. The adviser is the “go to” point when advice or support is being sought. Advisers work regularly with students in their case load.

Being independent, NJC has a completely different system of governance from Local Authority secondaries. It is presently a charity and governed by a Board of Trustees to whom the Principal is accountable. Regular Board Meetings are held. The Principal produces a progress report for each. The system is structurally simpler, and benefits from the effectiveness of communication, speed of action and flexibility of operation enjoyed by the Principal and the staff team. The small numbers of staff – 6 teachers and 4 support staff – and flattened management structure - complement the structural simplicity. The capacity to change radically, and quickly, also contrasts with the Local Authority sector.

Curriculum delivery has changed significantly as NJC has evolved. Initially, academic subjects were delivered to class groupings through a traditional timetable. Circumstances led members of staff to realise that this was not best meeting the needs of individual students because it did not cater well for either interest and aptitude or the rate of progress through course work. A system was put in place that takes care of these issues and also gives individual students greater responsibility for their own learning. They consult a schematic that tells them which members of staff are available and then decide, for themselves, where to go. Students can stay in that subject area for multiple sessions depending on what they are doing. Individuals’ participation across the range of the curriculum is monitored by teachers and moderated through the adviser system. The onus is on, and the responsibility is with, the learner.

It is believed that all of these factors, and others unmentioned or, indeed, unknown, provide the amalgam that leads to the re-engagement of students and ultimate success in courses and destinations.

Evaluating NJC Provision

NJC re-engages previously disengaged young people and gets leavers into positive destinations. What is the evidence for this statement?

If young people are disengaging this is reflected in their attendance at school. In 2017, 36 students accepted scholarships to NJC. The average attendance for the group at school was 75.7% in 2016-17; at NJC in 2017-18, it has increased to 82.26%.

NJC has had two groups of graduates. All 19 Graduates in 2016 and 13 in 2017 got positive destinations. This constitutes a 100% success rate against NJC’s principal objective. The young people have also demonstrated great success in National Qualifications in their academic, vocational and personal development studies. These rank amongst the best in the country (see Appendix 2 (a) and 2(b)).

Businesses often make use of customer satisfaction surveys to assess their performance. NJC's new intake was surveyed in August 2017. The students answered a set of questions which are almost exactly the same as those used by Her Majesty's Inspectors prior to the inspection of a school (Appendix 3). The focus in the questionnaire is on issues such as learning and teaching, progress, school ethos, support for individuals, how students felt they were treated and safeguarding. A school would aspire to have a high percentage of answers where its pupils were strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statements in the questions.

In the August questionnaire, the new NJC students were asked to answer on the basis of the school that they had just left. The 'strongly agree' and 'agree' responses were aggregated. The average positive response across the 18 questions was 29.94%. The young people did not rate their secondary school experience highly.

The survey was administered again in October 2017 after the students had been attending NJC for 6 weeks or so. This time they were asked for their views on NJC. The average positive response was 92.85%, with 5 questions scoring 100% satisfaction (Appendix 4). The 100% questions corresponding average score in the previous survey was 31.1%. These questions covered the availability of help, fair treatment and respect from staff, feeling safe and cared for and whether staff set a good example. In the students' eyes NJC is successful for them.

This view is corroborated by previous years. The surveys were done when the students concerned were in Year 2 of their NJC experience as opposed to Year 1. The class of 2015-16 had an average positive response of 95.8% (Appendix 5) and for 2017-18 it was 95.72% (Appendix 6). The previous school comparison is not available. However, it is of note that levels of satisfaction are maintained much further into the NJC experience than indicated by the Year 1 survey (earlier).

Carers have very clear views about the efficacy of NJC. A sample was surveyed for Year 1 and Year 2 cohorts in 2017. The survey is again one that was used in school inspections by HMIE. In the survey of the Year 1 carers, the average positive response across the 12 questions was 95.86% (Appendix 7); in Year 2 it was 99.17% (Appendix 8). In the Year 1 survey 7 of the 12 questions had 100% in the 'strongly agree' and 'agree' categories from the respondents; for Year 2 it was 11 of the 12 questions.

Carers could comment at the end of the survey. These comments indicate pleasure at student performance and an improvement on previous schools. Examples are - "We all feel (Name) has come on by leaps and bounds. We had never heard of NJC before but think it is a brilliant place;" "I feel the move to NJC has completely altered my son's future in terms of confidence and career path. We have our boy back. Even his grandparents have commented;" "We love the place. (Name) is much more confident and enjoys learning now;" "(Name) was not attending mainstream school and is now making a lot better progress and attending NJC;" "(Name) is doing tremendously well. He is very motivated and loves coming to NJC. He jumps out of bed every morning;" "(Name) is doing much better since attending NJC - definitely a lot better;" "(Name) has his own difficulties, however staff take this into account. They listen to him and his wishes are acted upon. They take his struggles into consideration when dealing with him. He is much more settled and overall enjoys being at NJC;" "Happy, happy, happy."

In February 2018, the survey was repeated with a group of Year 1 carers. They were asked about their levels of satisfaction with the school previously attended by their daughter/son. They were not any happier than their students had been, when asked about their previous school. The average positive response across the 12 questions was 32.64%. Like the students, the carers are much happier with NJC (Appendix 9).

The gathering evidence indicates that NJC is seen as being different from the Local Authority secondary schools that the students previously attended and that this difference is perceived as being positive. This is borne out by the findings from surveys and may be implied from the successes of the students in their programmes of study. This was tested out by interviewing a small sample of Year 1 students - 6 in 3 pairs. They were asked the question, "Is NJC different from the school that you used to go to?" The students all said that NJC is different and better. Consequently, they were asked to list the differences. The interviewer recorded their responses which were then sorted into 5 groups of positive differences - The Teachers, Relationships, Choices, The Curriculum and The Working Environment (Appendix 10).

To further explore this area, all of the students were then surveyed and asked to rank these in order of importance to them as individuals. The scores for each aspect of NJC life from each individual student were added together and the totals are shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Aspects of NJC and their Relative Importance in Making a Difference for Students

Ranking	Aspect of NJC Life	Score
1	The Teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The way that the teachers teach, what they are like, how they treat the students 	82
2	Relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The way we all get on, what NJC feels like, respect and friendliness 	107
3	Choices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Getting to pick the class that you go to, choosing vocational courses, more freedom 	129
4	The Curriculum <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NJC subjects, vocational courses, ASDAN, D of E etc. 	133
5	The Working Environment <ul style="list-style-type: none"> It is more like work than school, smaller classes, good breaks 	137

The teachers, and what they are like, were most significant for the students, followed by the quality of relationships in NJC. There is a gap between these aspects and the other 3, which are clustered closer together in numerical terms. So, it seems to be process rather than structure that is important to the students and, in the process, the human element, the relationships or generally the culture of the organisation are the important factors. The students are telling us that is what makes the difference.

Conclusion

The following conclusions may be drawn about the success of NJC:-

- Students' attendance is better at NJC than previously
- All Graduates have had positive destinations
- All Graduates have gained at least 5 SQA qualifications at over 80% having 5 at level 4
- Almost all Graduates have at least 1 SQA qualification at Level 5
- All Graduates have multiple qualifications in aspects of personal development
- All Graduates have vocational qualifications in at least one area
- Students and carers are overwhelmingly positive about their experiences at NJC and negative about their previous schools
- Students are clear that the difference between NJC and school results from positive teacher behaviours and positive relationships within NJC.

Looking beyond NJC, it is clear, from other examples, that an alternative approach will make a difference for some young people, if the establishment is right, if the young people are the right fit for it, and if they get the chance to access that provision.

Implications

NJC is a model that works. It is not THE ONLY model. It is A model. In the absence of alternatives, this kind of approach must be spread more widely for within the limitations set by available data, NJC is a very successful approach.

The culture of uniformity and conformity in Scottish Education needs to change. There is now clear evidence to confirm that an alternative approach (or approaches) will allow young people to succeed where they are presently failed by the mainstream system. Somehow, the system has to make it easier to be different. This is the principal challenge for the system. A funding model to facilitate the development of alternatives like NJC has been proposed by the NJC Board of Trustees. The big question is whether vested interest, outmoded political dogma and outdated thinking within the system will allow it to happen.

The NJC story is a classic case study in developing my system leadership, as indicated in the next paragraph. The proposal was radical, coming, as it did, from an industrialist with no formal connection with the Scottish Education System. Although an independent school, NJC is founded on the principle that partnerships with the Local Authority, and its schools that make nominations, are crucial. To get NJC established required extensive discussion with the Scottish Government and the Local Authority in which NJC is based. Establishing the necessary collaborative partnerships has not been easy and they still require some work!

Just getting NJC off the ground was in itself a system change because of its unique purpose, client group and hybrid status being an independent school, but partly supported by the public sector. The system leadership lessons have come from experience of implementing change where there is inbuilt inertia; from trying to move quickly in a culture where any progress is slow, measured and deliberate; from jumping the hurdles and diving through the hoops that required to be negotiated to bring about even the smallest of changes and, frankly, from overcoming opposition that the author believes has its basis in ideological prejudice.

However, NJC is open, is functioning successfully and the system has changed – at least a little.

The Author's Fellowship Journey

The author was a member of Jim McColl's small team that led the development of NJC in the run up to its opening. This, and subsequent developments, have involved working with company directors who would become the Trustees, local authority senior personnel, Scottish Government and Education Scotland officials, Her Majesty's Inspectors and even Government Ministers, opposition MSPs with education portfolios and Party leaders.

NJC is unique and has been successful. There are implications for Scottish Education. All at NJC, led by the Trustees, have the aspiration to bring about a significant shift in the system by being catalysts for alternative provision like NJC being available to young people across the country. This is an example of system leadership at the macro-level (Dimmock 2016). It also fits the Scottish College for Education Leadership's definition of system leadership. This experience has allowed the author to practice system leadership which is demonstrably different from the 27 years spent in senior management in Local Authority Secondary schools. The fellowship has brought a theoretical construct to support and enhance the experience of doing a day-to-day job that is at the cutting edge of system change. Having access to leading thinkers and practitioners has been a valuable learning experience and the benefits are apparent with greater insight and understanding being applied in practical leadership situations.

The Fellowship brought understanding to intuition. The tacit knowledge that is so important and has been built up over many years' developmental leadership experience in the way that expertise has been described (Ericsson, 2014), has to be complemented by higher order skills like reading situations, balanced judgement, intuition and political acumen to bring high performance. This has ultimately brought success at NJC. The author now understands this dynamic.

It is some time since the author was involved in the Head Teachers' Leadership Academy, delivered largely by Columba 1400. (Columba 1400, 2017). It explores how leaders' values impact upon the school cultures they develop. The values-based approach is crucial as NJC develops and was a thread that ran through the Fellowship programme

A system leader helps develop leaders in other establishments. The author has contributed to this as a presenter at several educational conferences in the past few years. These have been organised by bodies operating out with the system, like Reform Scotland. Sadly, the experience has been that there is little appetite within the Local Authority sector to hear from the author with the significant exception of colleagues on the SCEL Fellowship programme. Hence, development as a system leader in the sense of the Fellowship Programme, is experienced through involvement in the spread of the alternative NJC approach within Scotland by more circuitous routes.

The journey goes on with no end in sight, but wherever it is, the author has experienced satisfaction and enjoyment, the education system has changed and, most importantly of all, disengaged young people have re-engaged and gained positive destinations as they made the journey with us as fellow travellers.

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