

**BRISTOL EDUCATION INITIATIVE**  
**Final Report**  
**March 2006**

Project Director: James Wetz  
Bristol Education Initiative  
Business West: Chamber of Commerce and Initiative  
Leigh Court, Abbots Leigh  
Bristol BS8 3RA  
Email: jaibwetz@hotmail.com

---

***'HOLDING CHILDREN IN MIND OVER TIME'***

***Raising attainment in Bristol's secondary schools: How can we best support young people to be more resilient, to feel safe, to maintain good mental health, and to achieve and enjoy their learning?***

***Implications for school design and organisation, and the professional support of teachers.***

---

**Bristol Education Initiative:** a research and design project addressing the needs of less resilient young people who are leaving Bristol secondary schools each year without any formal qualifications.

Working with Bristol University Graduate School of Education, and in association with Antidote, Bristol Local Education Authority, Connexions West of England, Human Scale Education, National Institute of Mental Health England SW (NIMHE), UBHT and North Bristol NHS Trusts Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), and University of the West of England Faculty of Education.  
Supported by Business West.

---

Business West is the trading name of Bristol Chamber of Commerce Industry & Shipping registered in England No. 8752, and Business Link West Limited registered in England No. 3049428. Both companies are limited by guarantee, registered offices as shown.

# CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements .....</b>	
<b>Background and rationale .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Context.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Research objectives .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Research and methodology .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Data protection and ethical standards .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Organisation of the report .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Summary of research findings.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Quantitative data .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Qualitative data and narrative inquiry process.....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Young people’s narratives of their schooling.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Findings from the qualitative data.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Learning from international policy and practice.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Attachment and resilience .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Recommendations .....</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Collaborative Working Group .....</b>	<b>21</b>

## Acknowledgements

Bristol Education Initiative has been made possible primarily through the support of Business West, Chamber of Commerce and Initiative, and Bristol University Graduate School of Education who through the provision of a visiting fellowship have offered significant mentoring and research advice at every stage of the project.

In particular I would like to thank John Savage of Business West for his early agreement to support the work and his interest. Also to all those members of the Graduate School of Education for their exceptional support, including Professor Ros Sutherland, Dr. Elizabeth McNess whose direction and advice has been invaluable, Dr. Sally Thomas for advice and support with the statistical analysis, and to Dr. Kim Etherington for providing supervision of the Narrative Inquiry research methodology.

In addition this work would not have been possible without the support and advice of the following: Heather Tomlinson and Paul Taylor of Bristol Local Education Authority; Vicky Heath at Connexions West of England who helped with the early data and arrangements for the student interviews; Mary Tasker and Jane Thomas of Human Scale Education who made arrangements for the visit to Boston; Harriet Goodman of Antidote who worked on aspects of the narrative interviews; Paul Barrows and Diana Wetz who deepened my understanding of Child and Adolescent Health Mental Health; John Shears of NIMHE; Ruth Deakin Crick of the Graduate School of Education whose advice helped with the design of the project; Lynn Raphael Reed of the University of the West of England who has made connections with additional research being undertaken in the city; Heather Harries of Neighbourhood Renewal; Sonia Jackson for highlighting the needs of 'Looked after Children'; Rod Morgan, Chair of the Youth Justice Board; Ruth Rodriguez of the Center for Collaborative Education who made arrangements for school visits in Boston; and Tove Ketil Lenger and Ketty Matthisson who made all the arrangements for the school visits in Denmark.

Finally, and most importantly, I would like to thank the five young people who, as research associates, shared the stories of their experience of schooling in the city with such courage and intelligence.

The approach and model for 'Bristol Education Initiative' has been to:

- research a significant issue that is of concern to the education community in Bristol
- use the knowledge, intelligence, and research capability of Higher Education
- work with partners across Business, Child and Adolescent Mental Health, LEA and City Council who could reflect on and support the development of the programme
- provide perspectives about the research issue within fifteen months
- ensure that the study remained closely aligned to the city's policy objectives of Every Child Matters/Change for Children.

James Wetz: Visiting Fellow, Bristol University Graduate School of Education  
March 2006

## **Background and rationale**

In sixteen years of leading and managing large secondary schools I became increasingly aware of the school system's inability to meet the needs of a small but 'statistically hidden' group of students who faced the challenge of complex social, emotional and environmental demands. The school system's inability to meet their needs is reflected also in the way in which they were labelled as troublesome and disaffected. My growing understanding of these students caused me to consider whether these disaffected students were in fact students who had lacked affection and were in some sense acting out 'remembered hurt' of neglect, loss or insecure early attachment which schools had neither the expertise nor resource to recognise and attend to.

The working premise of the project therefore is that a significant proportion of students who disengage from education in Bristol are manifesting attachment anxieties related to the quality of relationships and experiences from early childhood. Such issues of 'affection' impact on their learner identities and their resilience to cope with their secondary school experience. The current design and organisation of our secondary schools and schooling (including the size of school, curriculum, assessment, and teacher pupil relationships) limits the capacity to meet the depth of emotional and social needs of these students. This has implications for the way we design and organise our schools and develop teachers as professionals.

This research was carried out between January 2005 and January 2006 and was supported by Business West (Chamber of Commerce and Initiative). The Graduate School of Education at Bristol University provided research advice and direction, and a Collaborative Working Group provided oversight for the project. The Collaborative Working Group which helped shape the brief and critique the preliminary findings included Business West, Bristol University Graduate School of Education, Bristol Local Education Authority, Connexions West of England, Antidote, Human Scale Education, the National Institute of Mental Health England (SW), the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services of the North Bristol and UBHT NHS Trusts, and the Faculty of Education of the University of the West of England. Membership details of the Collaborative Working Group are included at the end of the report.

The views expressed in this report are the author's and do not necessarily reflect those of the partners associated with the project. There are also supplementary papers accompanying this report which provide detail and background related to sections of the report.

## **Context**

The local educational context for this study has been Bristol LEA's place at the bottom of the league tables for GCSE performance nationally; and with the numbers of students leaving mainstream Bristol schools without GCSE qualifications at 10% – nearly twice the national average.

The social and economic context in Bristol is one where deprivation and personal adversities have continued to undermine the well being of a significant minority of children and young people. The city's most deprived wards are likely to have the lowest birth weight, the highest proportion of 0–15 year olds, and the highest numbers on the child protection registers. In Bristol 22 out of 35 wards have above average child poverty compared to the rest of England.

The national context shows that up to a third of children may at some stage develop mental health problems, run away from home, commit offence, truant and be absent from education, or not be in training or work between the ages of 16 and 18.

The current policy context in Bristol is one where new energies are being brought together for multi agency work in relation to 'Every Child Matters' known locally as 'Change for Children'.

This study presents findings and implications for policy and practice which are directly related to these contexts and in particular seeks to make a contribution to supporting children and young people in the city staying safe, being healthy, enjoying learning and achieving throughout their years of compulsory schooling.

## **Research objectives**

The project had four main objectives:

- To identify the characteristics of the students who left Bristol's mainstream secondary schools aged 16 in 2004 without any formal qualifications.
- To look more closely at the influences that affected a sample of these students to gain insights into their experience of schooling in the city.
- To engage the Bristol community in a conversation about the design of its schools in order to develop models of provision that would be both socially and educationally inclusive.
- To look at how schools might be designed and organised to support less resilient students.

## **Research methodology**

The research element of the project used both quantitative and qualitative methods. Bristol LEA data were analysed to determine the underlying characteristics of 296 students who left compulsory mainstream education in July of 2004 at the age of 16 without any GCSE qualifications. Within this the research project focused on a group of 116 students who although not gaining any GCSE qualifications at the end of their secondary schooling, did achieve average or above average results in English, Mathematics or Science at Key Stage 2 at the end of their

primary schooling. From this cohort of 116 students a sub-sample (five) of young people was identified. The five students selected were profiled against the characteristics of the group of 116, and were invited to co-construct knowledge about the circumstances and experiences of their schooling, through a process of narrative inquiry. The project also undertook a number of field studies, both at home and abroad to look at alternative models of provision.

## **Data protection and ethical standards**

The project took into careful consideration the rights and interests of those affected by the research. Where it was reasonable to do so informed consent was obtained from those directly involved in the research, and where appropriate, steps were taken to maintain confidentiality and minimise intrusion into their lives. The research was conducted in line with Bristol University guidelines on research, with BERA (British Education Research Association), and with the relevant policies of Bristol Local Education Authority and Connexions West of England.

## **Organisation of the report**

The report begins with a summary of the key findings of each of the four elements of the research programme, followed by more detailed discussion of these findings and their implications. The four elements in the report are:

- 1 Quantitative data on the 296 young people in the Year 11 cohort of July 2004 who left mainstream LEA secondary schools without any GCSEs.
- 2 Qualitative data derived from the narrative inquiry interviews with a sub sample from this cohort, and outline accounts of their school and family experience.
- 3 Learning from international policy and practice drawn from field visits to Denmark and Boston (USA).
- 4 Findings from a study of early relational experience, attachment, and risk and resilience factors.

The report concludes with two specific recommendations that would provide the structure and capacity within the city to develop and address the findings of the report.

## Summary of findings from the four elements of the research project:

- 1 The quantitative data for the year cohort of 2004 showed that:
  - A significant percentage of young people (10%) left LEA mainstream secondary schools in Bristol in July 2004 without any qualifications at GCSE, which was nearly twice the national average.
  - 38% (116 pupils) of those who gained no GCSE qualifications at secondary school at all, did achieve at least one Level 4 or above in English, Mathematics or Science at Key Stage 2 at primary school.
  - 30% of these young people were eligible for free school meals compared to a city average of 17%.
  
- 2 The qualitative data derived from the narrative inquiry interviews identified that:
  - The young people had complex emotional and social challenges to manage and talked of a sense of isolation both at home and at school.
  - The young people experienced many changes in family and school settings between the ages of 5 and 16.
  - The young people had experienced significant early loss and separation, mostly with absent fathers.
  - The reliability, care, safety, and consistency enjoyed at the primary school was not felt to be available to the young people at secondary school.
  - These young people with social and emotional needs excluded themselves from secondary school before reaching the age of 14.
  
- 3 The study of international policy and practice highlighted that:
  - School design and organisation which is informed by the importance and primacy of relationships enables young people to stay safe, be healthy, and enjoy and achieve in significantly greater measure.
  - There is a need for professional support and supervision to be made available to teachers to enable them to reflect critically on the mental health and behaviours of young people with complex emotional and social needs.
  
- 4 The study of early relational experience, attachment theory, and child development identified that:
  - There is a need for a consistent, reliable, manageable, and safe educational setting/holding environment to support less resilient young people to enjoy learning and achieve qualifications at secondary school.
  - The impact that neglect, early loss, and less than secure early attachment has on the capacity of less resilient children to manage the demands of family and school life is very significant.

## Quantitative data

Of the 296 young people who left Bristol's mainstream secondary schools at the age of 16 in July 2004 and who did not gain GCSE qualifications:

- 5 wards in the city were significantly over represented
- 60% were male and 40% female
- 83% were 'white British'
- 30% were eligible for free school meals
- 12% had been excluded from school

The full detail of the identified characteristics of this group, which is summarised above, is set out in a supplementary paper available with this report.

The highest concentrations of students leaving without any GCSE qualifications were to be found in 5 wards and 7 schools in the city. In some of these schools the number of students was significant, ranging from between 10 and 20% of the school's Year 11 group.

The gender balance in the research cohort was 60% male and 40% female compared to 52% male and 48% female in the Year 11 group across all the city's schools. Black and ethnic minority students were not over represented in the cohort and the number of students from Asian backgrounds who left school with no qualifications was negligible.

A significant characteristic of the research group was related to eligibility for Free School Meals, with the research group showing 30% were eligible compared to 17% in the Year 11 group across the whole city, indicating that social and economic factors are very significant for the families of children leaving without qualifications.

The number excluded from school was not a significant characteristic although the Narrative Inquiry interviews indicated that many of those who gain no GCSE qualifications are not necessarily formally excluded but self exclude and walk away from school often without even attempting Key Stage 3 or Key Stage 4.

No attendance data on the young people in the research cohort was available from the LEA at the time of the research study.

### ***Critical finding from the quantitative data***

A critical finding from the data of these 296 young people who did not gain any qualifications at GCSE was that 38% of them (116 young people) did however achieve average or above average results in English, Mathematics or Science at Key Stage 2 at the end of their primary schooling.

It was from this group of the 116 young people who gained a Level Grade 4 or better at Key Stage 2 at primary school in English, Mathematics or Science that a sub sample of 5 students

was selected. This sample reflected the characteristics as closely as possible of the overall group of 116.

Details of these characteristics are also included in the supplementary paper available with this report.

This sample of 5 students was involved in Narrative Inquiry interviews to hear the stories of their experiences of being educated in Bristol.

The average or above average achievement of these students in English, Mathematics or Science at their primary schools might have been grounds to suppose they should have gone on to achieve up to 5 GCSE qualifications at C grade or above, with the possibility of accessing Advanced Level GCE or equivalent, with onward access to Higher Education.

The data were supplied by Bristol LEA, supplemented by Connexions West of England, and analysed by statisticians at Bristol University Graduate School of Education.

## **Qualitative data derived from Narrative Inquiry interviews: the process**

The methodological approach adopted for this research project was Narrative Inquiry. It was used to collect qualitative data on the experience of schooling in the city by 5 young people who gained reasonable results at KS2 in primary school but failed to gain qualifications at GCSE at the age of 16.

The approach seeks to allow the story of the 'student' to be heard as fully as possible. The depth of the narrative rather than the extent of the sample is important. In this approach the interviewer limits interventions to points of clarification about dates, places, names, times etc.

Encouragement, acknowledgement of difficulties, and empathic responses are offered by the interviewer. In this way knowledge is co-constructed.

There were two stages in the process.

- The first meeting was around an hour when the young person was asked to share the story of their experiences of schooling in the city. After a short break the interview was resumed for a further 30 minutes when there was an opportunity to raise issues and reflect upon areas that were significant in the interview.
- The second meeting was used to share the transcripts, and to redraft the account of the story that had been written by the researcher. Co-editing the story ensured validity that this is an account of the young person's story and that they feel secure with this account. Four out of five students were able to attend the second meetings.

### Key principles of Narrative Inquiry

- The focus is on story rather than analysis and opinion.
- The researcher positions him/herself as a 'naive/curious enquirer'.
- The interviewee is the expert on his or her own experience.
- The contract between the researcher and subject is explicit about the subject's right to withdraw from the research at any point.
- The contract is explicit about the limits of confidentiality.

Narrative interviews were co-ordinated by Connexions West of England

- The interviews were held at the Connexions Offices, Bristol.
- Back up and referral support was offered by Connexions to all young people who participated in the research.
- The researcher identified the subjects anonymously from the data base. Connexions West of England identified the particular students and approached them by phone to ask if they would be willing to participate. Once this was ascertained then the researcher was given contact details. A letter inviting the subject to participate, along with an information sheet detailing the purposes of the research and the methodology involved, and a consent form was sent to the young persons. This was followed up by a phone call to arrange a time for the interviews.

## **Narrative Inquiry: Young People's Stories**

In outline these are the school and family stories of the five young people who provided their narratives for the project.

The more detailed extended stories drawn from the transcripts and without commentary are included in a supplementary paper that is available with this report.

### ***Devlin's story***

Devlin achieved a Level 4 for both English and Mathematics, and Level 3 for his Science at Key Stage 2 at the end of his primary schooling. He did not take Key Stage 3 tests or GCSE examinations at secondary school.

#### ***The school story***

Devlin had been to three primary schools before the end of Year 6. He had significant eyesight difficulties that affected his reading and writing and which were only recognised and addressed at the age of 9, and despite this achieved Level 4 grades in English and Mathematics, and Level 3 in Science at the end of his primary schooling. When Devlin transferred to secondary school he had a number of fixed term exclusions up to Year 9 and was excluded permanently from school after a fight with a teacher. Devlin's Learning Mentor who had provided support for him through Years 8 and 9 had to leave the school through ill health a few months prior to Devlin's permanent exclusion.

Devlin was offered a 10 week Business Course after his exclusion, but for the second half of the summer term in Year 10 and all through Year 11 he was not attending school, or in education. Devlin, with the support of Connexions, is now at College. Devlin had six different educational settings from ages 5 to 16.

#### ***The family story***

Devlin has an elder sister who has learning difficulties who left school early at 14 for a college placement. Devlin's dad left home when Devlin was 12 months old. His dad, who lives in Leicester, is in irregular contact, mostly by phone. Devlin's mum had a child by a new partner when Devlin was 8 years old and the family moved to a new home on the other side of Bristol where they remained for 5 weeks before the new relationship broke up and the family moved back to Bedminster and lived with Devlin's auntie, and when she sold her home they moved into a council house close by. Devlin lived in four different homes between the ages of 8 and 12.

## *Commentary*

Devlin endured persistent bullying and there was an almost daily struggle to '*manage all the stuff that happened in the day*' and to cope with the constant anxiety about getting out of control. A few months after Devlin's Learning Mentor left and was not replaced he ended up in a fight with a teacher that led to his exclusion from school. This was not a consistent, reliable, and safe environment for a boy with his background to be able to enjoy learning and achieve in. Devlin in his narrative says over and over again that this is how it was at secondary school, '*what you should expect*' and that there is '*little that you can do about it*'. He became resigned about '*this stuff happening to him*' – the bullying being almost too painful to name directly. He had insufficient resilience to manage this hurtful environment. He felt very alone and isolated with all this difficulty once the Learning Mentor had left.

## ***Kirsten's story***

Kirsten achieved Level 4 grades in English, Mathematics and Science at primary school. She did not take any Key Stage 3 tests or sit any GCSE examinations at secondary school.

## *The school story*

Kirsten attended only one primary school where she was exceptionally happy. She would write twenty page stories, enjoyed learning and can remember all her teachers. She wept when she left her primary school. She transferred to secondary school where she found she could be top of the class without having to work hard. In Year 8 she began to play truant. In Year 9 she only attended school for the equivalent of 4 weeks all through the year. She did not attend school at all in Years 10 and 11.

## *The family story*

Kirsten was an only child. She never knew her dad. Her mum and step dad stole to fuel their drug habit, and Kirsten was cooking and looking after herself from the age of 8. At this age with her mum and step dad in bed recovering from scoring the drugs from the night before it would be usual for Kirsten to get herself up in the morning, dress for school, make her own breakfast and get herself to primary school where she was very happy. At the age of 13 she moved out of home and went to live with a friend who was in her 20's and who had a 2 year old girl and whose boyfriend was in prison in Exeter. At the age of 14 she moved again into the house of another friend who tried to persuade her to go back to school. She then moved back into her mum's house with her boyfriend. Her step dad has been in prison for the last two years.

She would like to know her own dad but is unsure whether he would want to know her.

## Commentary

Four out of five young people in this study did not know their fathers who had left within a year of their birth, sometimes months. Loss and separation is a recurring feature of these stories with little support or intervention available to help the young people address this hurt.

*'And your dad in all this. Did he have a view?'*

*'Step dad yes. Yes, but he's up the jail now, he's been up the jail now for two years. Don't know my real dad.'*

*'Have you ever wanted to find out about him?'*

*'Yes, but I do, but I don't then, 'cos I know that if he wants to know me, if he wanted to know me then he would have got in touch by now.'*

The change of tense here highlights Kirsten's sense of deep loss and rejection. Kirsten, like all the interviewees enjoyed her primary schooling.

*'I enjoyed primary school, that was really good. I loved working and doing good at school and I had top marks and stuff. It was a good school. It was like we had one teacher and our class was really close and we were really close to our teacher so it really helped us and then that made me want to work for her . . . she treated us like adults even though we were kids. She wasn't a teacher she was more like an auntie or something . . . yes it was like we used to have competitions to see who could do most work and stuff.'*

This speaks highly of staying safe, being healthy, enjoying learning and achieving at primary school. Part of the difficulty expressed in the narratives was that there was an expectation from the young people that when they transferred to secondary school they would re-find that level of personal care and holding, only to find that given their lack of resilience, it was not there for them in sufficient measure:

Kirsten's response to the question *'Are you sad about the fact that you left school'* is an urgent and passionate repetition of a wish: *'Yes, I wish I never, I wish I never left school, I wish that I'd never left . . .'*

## **Julia's story**

Julia achieved Level 4 in Science and Level 3 in English and Mathematics at the end of her primary schooling. She did not take any tests at Key Stage 3 or sit any GCSE examinations at secondary school.

### *The school story*

Julia attended one primary school and was happy and secure there. She liked her teachers and had good friends. The early years at secondary school she managed. She had 100% attendance in Year 7, but felt she was bored, and felt that there was little choice available. In Year 9 she began to misbehave and was often sent to the support room particularly by her English and PE teachers. She felt her teachers did not like her. She began to truant, attending school for three mornings a week and then not turning up in the afternoons. She did not sit her Key Stage 3 tests.