

# COERCION OR CO-OPERATION? DEVELOPING TEACHERS' MOTIVATIONAL SKILLS IN THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION SECTOR

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**Abstract.** This paper is based on a one year research project in the UK designed to investigate how effectively teacher education and continuing professional development for the vocational sector is equipping teachers to motivate learners and manage non-compliant behaviour. Carried out in collaboration with 203 teachers of vocational education, the inquiry set out to identify, through the use of observations and focus groups, the learner behaviours most commonly identified by teachers as 'challenging', and the strategies used by teachers in addressing these. Although its focus is on teacher competence to motivate and manage, the research was not predicated on a deficit model of teachers, but aimed to identify successful skills, strategies and approaches and discuss the extent to which these can be usefully incorporated into useful teacher training programmes for the sector. The findings suggest that lack of learner motivation in the 14-19 age group is endemic within vocational education provision manifesting in behaviours such as lack of punctuality, failure to submit coursework and refusal to remain on task. There was also evidence to indicate that experienced teachers were no more effective in managing such behaviours than teachers in their first year of professional practice. The implications of this, in terms of teacher education and development, are discussed in the final section of this paper which goes on to argue that, although it is necessary in addressing non-compliance for teachers to develop a positive relationship with learners, the root causes of such behaviours often lie beyond the individual teacher's control.

**Keywords:** behaviour; motivation; vocational education; professional development; relationship

**JEL classification:** Health, Education and Welfare

## 1 Introduction

Vocational education in the UK is part of what is known as the Lifelong Learning sector (LLS). Colleges of Further Education (FE) play a key role in this sector, and it is the teaching and learning in such colleges which provides the context for this research. Currently, prospective teachers for the sector are required to gain a sector-specific teaching qualification (although recent developments in the form of the interim Lingfield Review (2012) indicate that this requirement may be dropped). Applicants for the qualification are often asked why they have chosen to teach in the vocational or further education rather than in schools; and their answer almost always makes reference to the idea that learners in this sector are there because they want to be, and are therefore likely to be more highly motivated and better behaved than those who are still in school and subject to compulsory attendance (Wallace, 2007). Their first days of observing experienced teachers at work in the sector are often experienced as a sharp contrast to these preconceptions (Wallace, 2002) as the extent of de-motivation and non-compliance among some groups of learners becomes apparent. The purpose of this research, therefore, was two-fold: it was designed to discover the commonest and most frequently encountered examples of de-motivated or non-compliant student behaviour encountered by vocational teachers in a sample of three Colleges of Further Education; and it sought also to explore the strategies which teachers used to address these, in order to identify examples of successful practice. The ultimate purpose of this categorization and exploration was to inform future teacher training programmes and programmes of continuing professional development (CPD) for the sector, enabling them to equip teachers and trainee teachers with a repertoire of effective skills in motivation and behaviour improvement. The research was carried out as a collaborative endeavour between a UK University and three centres of FE: one serving a wide area combining both rural and urban populations; one serving a disadvantaged urban population; and the third drawing its students from a small town with a fluctuating Traveller population.

Low levels of motivation and high levels of disengagement among some groups of 14-19 year olds on vocational courses in colleges of FE have been apparent for more than a decade (for example: Reeves, 1995; Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Perry, 1999; Wallace, 2002). A number of different explanations have been offered for this, as we shall see in the following section, ranging from the nature of the vocational curriculum itself to the argument that learners find themselves on such courses by default rather than through choice. In addition, there has been an ongoing government policy discourse asserting the need for a qualification linked to national standards for teachers in this sector of education and training; a discourse whose subtext suggests that learners' poor behaviour and lack of

motivation may be due to some deficiency in the standard of teaching they receive. The current indications that this policy may be reversed (Lingfield, 2012) does not necessarily signal an end to what Ball (1990:18) once termed the ‘discourse of derision’, as this paper will go on to argue in the final section. It must be stressed here, therefore, that the purpose of this research is in no way predicated on a deficit model of teachers. It seeks to identify good practice not as a means to ‘correct’ teachers whose styles or strategies are unsuccessful in encouraging students to engage with their learning, but rather as a pragmatic approach to discovering and sharing what works most successfully. Its aim is not uniformity of teaching approach, but to equip teachers with a repertoire of possible strategies which they can employ in the best interests of the learners.

## 2 The Literature

The majority of literature relating to the behaviour management and motivation of learners relates to the school context, rather than post-school, post-compulsory vocational education. As we have seen, there is an assumption – certainly among many entrants to the profession of vocational teacher - that ‘post-compulsory’ equates with ‘voluntary’ and that therefore learners in the vocational sector will be self-motivated and keen to collaborate in their own learning. If we focus on further education or lifelong learning, the literature relevant to this research can be categorized into five main arguments relating to the causes of vocational students’ disengagement. These are:

- socio-economic issues and the design of the vocational curriculum;
- inflexibility and instrumentalism in the occupational standards for vocational teachers;
- lack of real choice for learners about what courses and qualifications they can follow;
- market ideology and its impact on patterns of recruitment and retention;
- the status and professional identity of vocational teachers.

Each of these will be explored briefly here under its own heading before the common themes are summarized in the context of this inquiry.

### 2.1 *Socio-economic issues and the design of the vocational curriculum*

The competence-based, instrumental nature of the vocational curriculum in the UK following the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications in 1986 has meant that, for example, the provision of a wider curriculum based on a liberal education model and incorporating ‘liberal’ or ‘general’ studies such as the discussion of literature, politics or social issues had to be abandoned for vocational students. Instead they are required only to demonstrate their competence against a set of occupational standards at a level considered appropriate to them. It has long been argued (for example: Reeves, 1995; Halliday, 1999) that the repetitious, instrumental nature of the competence-based curriculum encourages young learners to see the process of learning as a ‘can do’ tick list, and thereby fails to engage their enthusiasm for deeper levels of understanding or for learning *per se*. Reeves argues that this encourages a ‘tacit acceptance that proper education is rewarded with accreditation not by gratification’ (1995: 105). Moreover, in a socio-economic climate where such accreditation cannot guarantee success in the job market, the learners are well aware of the low value placed upon the qualifications for which they are being urged to work (Halliday, 1999).

### 2.2 *Inflexibility and instrumentalism in the occupational standards for vocational teachers*

Early critics of the introduction of standards-based training for vocational teachers argued that it constituted a ‘dumbing down’ of the professional qualification. Bleakley, for example, criticized the ‘unacknowledged, anti-intellectual pragmatism’ (1999:1) of the initial standards as originally set out by the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO), arguing the need for a greater emphasis on reflective practice and the flexibility to respond to learning situations as they arose. The standards were, he argued, both too descriptive and too prescriptive and, as such, allowed no leeway for ‘standards generated by idiosyncratic practice’ (ibid: 6). It has been further argued (Lucas, 2007) that basing teacher training for the sector on ‘standards’ rather than on ‘knowledge’ leads to a failure to acknowledge the complex processes and motivations involved in the learning process, giving undue emphasis instead to the idea of vocational education and work-based learning as little more than ‘learning by doing.’ As a means of improving standards of learning and levels of achievement in the sector, the occupational standards

for teachers have also been criticized on the ground that such improvement is unlikely to be brought about simply by addressing the issue of teaching rather than the systemic problems endemic within the context of the lifelong learning sector, such as the lack of employment for college leavers (Wallace, 2002).

### *2.3 Lack of real choice for learners about what courses and qualifications they can follow*

The options for school-leavers aged 16 in the UK are now very limited, and rarely include a direct entry to employment. Most are required to remain in some sort of education or training. Schools select pupils who will stay on for further study. For those who are not selected, or who do not choose to stay at school, the main post-school progression route is into some form of lifelong learning. Most commonly this means a vocational course at a college of further education. It may well be the case, therefore, that learners find themselves on vocational programmes that they have not in any real sense 'chosen' and which may not coincide with what they consider to be their needs or aspirations (Wallace, 2007).

### *2.4 Market ideology and its impact on patterns of recruitment and retention*

A number of factors which could be seen as linking the impact of market ideology on colleges of further education as vocational education providers and the lack of motivation and engagement among some groups of learners in that sector have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Wallace, 2002). They include measures towards cost-effectiveness of curriculum delivery such as 'resource-based' learning, an approach which uses a minimum number of teachers to facilitate the learning of a maximum number of students through use of information technology (IT) or other learning resources, sometimes at a distance. This minimizing of teacher-learner contact, it is argued, can undermine the quality of the learning experience for the student (Ainley and Bailey, 1997). Moreover, market-driven targets of recruitment and retention can lead not only to high retention rates combined with low achievement (as non-compliant learners are tolerated in order to maintain retention figures even though their behaviour may act as a barrier to learning for others in their class), but also an emphasis on head count rather than best fit, with learners finding themselves on courses not through choice but because places were available and recruitment targets had to be met (Perry, 1999). Above all, it is argued, the market ideology, presented through discourses which emphasise the instrumental nature of education and training (Wallace, 2002), suggests to learners that education's sole purpose is to qualify the learner for a job and make him or her into a productive economic unit. Alternative discourses about the role that education and training can play in personal development and intrinsic satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002) are thus rendered silent.

### *2.5 The status and professional identity of vocational teachers*

There is also a growing body of literature which debates the professional identity of teachers in vocational education. Here we find the argument that an improved quality of teaching – and hence of learner motivation and behaviour – would be better achieved through enabling a more cohesive view of professionalism rather than through the application of competence-based standards for teachers (Clow 2001). And the very debate about what constitutes 'professionalism' includes the suggestion that teachers see it as lying in the willingness and ability to perform beyond the curriculum requirements (Robson et al, 2004) which might include ways of relating to learners or enhancing the teacher's theoretical understanding of what factors will best motivate and engage them. Like Clow (2001), Jephcote and Salisbury (2009) point to the lack of professional cohesion among vocational teachers which, combined with the destabilising effects of the recurrent changes in policies and practices to which the sector is subjected, and the market pressures of performativity, they must overcome in order to meet their learners' needs and work in their best interests.

### *2.6 A summary of the literature*

As we have seen, previous research offers us a number of explanations for the low level of motivation and the negative behaviour which many vocational teachers encounter amongst their students. All of these have a number of factors in common. They suggest that the origins of the problem can be found at a policy level, whether it is the

application of market ideology to educational institutions and processes, or the categorising of teaching skills as a set of competences. They argue that these policies, whether at national level like the introduction of NVQs, or at institutional level like resource-based learning or an emphasis on retention, disempower the teacher and destabilise the profession. And, perhaps most important of all in the context of this research, none of them suggests that current worrying trends in learner motivation and behaviour are as a result of deficiency on the part of teachers, or that these can be addressed by requiring teachers to 'improve' their practice.

### 3 Method and Methodology

In line with the research summarized above, we set out to discover not what teachers might be doing wrong, but rather what worked, in terms of facilitating students' engagement with their learning. To this end, it was necessary to observe teachers across a wide as possible range of subjects and including a range of teaching experience, from newly qualified teachers to those with many years in post. Observation in itself presents the researcher with obvious difficulties in terms of reliability and validity (Wellington, 2000). The presence of an observer would inevitably impact upon the dynamics of teacher-student and student-student interactions for the duration of the observation (Cohen et al; 2011), and perhaps particularly so if the observer was an unfamiliar 'outsider'. It was decided, therefore, to use the peer observation arrangement which each of the colleges implemented regularly as part of their self assessment framework. This meant that the observations would be carried out during the course of a familiar procedure and by familiar staff, thus minimizing their impact on normal interactions. The use of observers other than the researchers themselves, however, created a different set of potential difficulties, as different observers might each have their own interpretation of what constituted key terms such as 'compliant behaviour' and might hold differing views on what constituted 'effectiveness' in terms of teachers' motivational or behaviour management strategies. In order to address this, all 20 observers were fully briefed about the purpose of the research and its terms of reference, and were provided with written definitions and examples of the behaviours and strategies they were asked to note, as well as a standardized pro-forma on which to record their observations. Their brief was to:

- 'Note all examples of learner behaviour or interaction which falls into the category of "lack of motivation" or the category of "non-compliant behaviour", as defined on your briefing sheet.
- Note all strategies used by the teacher which successfully addressed these.'

A 'successful' strategy was defined as one which brought about an improvement in motivation or behaviour which lasted until the end of the lesson being observed.

These measures were designed to raise levels of reliability and validity as far as was possible. As with all qualitative research which relies for its data on the observation of, and response to, complex human interactions, this methodological approach raises a number of epistemological issues, including the questions about the extent to which we can take the resulting observations as a basis for claims to knowledge about what 'works' in the classroom and what does not. One indicator would be the degree of consistency in the resulting data from 203 observations by 20 observers across three colleges, and this will be explored further in the next section.

The observations were followed by a focus group meeting of the observers during which the group discussed with the researchers both the process (that is, their experience) of the observations, and the resulting data. The focus group was conducted on an informant rather than a respondent model (Powney and Watts, 1987), where the participants were invited to address very open questions with prompts such as, 'Tell us something about your findings.' The purpose of the informant approach is to allow the participants to open up ideas or areas of discussion which the researchers may not have thought of. It does not, like the respondent approach, restrict participants to only those possibilities which the researchers may have thought of. In other words, it allows for the exploration of the unforeseen. In this way, participants were encouraged to theorize from the data collected and to share their understanding of its meaning and significance. The research was conducted in conformity with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (2011). All participants, whether observers or observed, provided their informed consent and were told of their right to withdraw at any stage of the inquiry.

## 4 Discussion of Findings

The results of the observations and the outcomes of the focus group discussion can be categorized as follows:

- Most frequently observed examples of unmotivated or non-compliant behaviour
- What is effective in addressing these?
- Focus group's theorizing about the causes of low motivation and non-compliance in 14-19 year old learners.

Each of these will be discussed under its own heading before the findings as a whole are summarized at the end of this section.

### 4.1 *Most frequently observed examples of unmotivated or non-compliant behaviour*

According to the observers' notes, the most frequently occurring indicators of non-compliance or de-motivation were: lack of punctuality; not handing work in at the required time; the use of phones during class time, for calls and messaging or accessing the internet or playing games; talking while the teacher is speaking or instead of concentrating on a task, so that noise levels constitute a potential barrier to other students' learning; and rude or confrontational behaviour which demonstrated a lack of respect for the teacher and/or fellow students. There are several things to note about this list. The first is that these behaviours demonstrate what we might call 'low level' non-compliance, and do not, on the whole, include violent, aggressive or criminal activity. The second is that, despite being non-serious in that sense, all of these have the potential to disrupt the learning of other students who might be better motivated or would choose to be more compliant. Thirdly, it was clear that this range of behaviour was found across all vocational areas, at all levels of qualification, and among all groups, including classes of 'mature' or adult students; that is, students aged 21 years or over. Finally, although these behaviours were common, they were found to occur with more frequency among the 14-19 year old age group, and most frequently of all among 14-19 year olds on lower level (Level 2) vocational courses. There was found to be no correlation between the age or gender or length of professional experience of the teacher and the frequency of these behaviours, nor between vocational area or subject and such behaviours. Moreover, this data remained consistent across all three colleges.

### 4.2 *What is effective in addressing these?*

In contrast to the consistent data which emerged on behaviours, the observations produced no such clear-cut evidence about the efficacy of teachers' strategies for dealing with them. However, there were indications that teachers had most success in building student motivation and encouraging positive behaviour in cases where the relationship between teachers and learners appeared positive, cheerful and mutually respectful. There was some discussion in the focus group which sought to explore the causal relationship between positive, cheerful teaching and well-motivated learners, since it could be justifiably and as easily claimed in theory that motivated learners produce cheerful teachers. The majority view, however, was that a crucial factor in motivating students was the attitude and demeanor of the teacher; and that the observations had demonstrated this repeatedly. Instead of strategies, then, what emerged from observations and focus group was rather a set of conditions under which vocational students are most likely to exhibit motivation and positive, appropriate behaviour; and that these conditions are recognized as necessary by the 'cheerful' teachers, who adjust their planning and teaching to create or accommodate them. These conditions can be articulated in the following way: That students engage with learning

- when they have the ability to do the task
- when they can see some point in doing it
- when they fear the consequences of not doing it
- when they can take some pride in doing it
- when doing it fits their image of who they are

The evidence suggests that teachers' experience or length of service is not a correlating factor in relation to recognising the importance of these conditions. A teacher in their first year of professional practice was as likely to take those conditions into account as one approaching retirement. Nor was it clear whether those teachers whose practice reflected this list could or would articulate it as a factor which played a role in their successful motivation of students. In other words, there remains a question about the extent to which they owed their success to reflection or

conscious theorising on their own practice. Moreover, it is not clear how the third bullet point ‘fits’ with the rest, its reference to ‘fear’ striking a discordant note. Focus group suggestions that this recorded observations of ‘teacher presence’ or ‘authority’ seem inadequate to explain the choice of words.

#### *4.3 Focus group’s theorizing about the causes of low motivation and non-compliance in 14-19 year old learners*

Perhaps some of the most interesting, if least anticipated findings to come out of the focus group discussion were the theories these teachers put forward to explain the low levels of motivation and the disruptive behaviour of some sections of the vocational student population. One popular theory was that learners’ lack of concentration did not arise from inability or unwillingness but from the fact that they arrived at college without having eaten breakfast or, in some cases, with inadequate clothing in cold weather. There was a general consensus that standards of behaviour at college were primarily influenced by the learners’ home environment and by whether parents were generally supportive of college rules or of teachers’ attempts to inculcate good manners and safe practices. There was also agreement that learners could be encouraged towards appropriate behaviour by demonstrations of what was required in the workplace, so that, for example, hairdressing students understood and responded to the need for politeness and helpfulness in a salon environment, and trainee electricians would abide by work-related safety protocols. This correlation between appropriate behaviour and vocational area did not, however, show up in the observation reports, and the so this aspect of the focus group evidence remains anecdotal.

It is noteworthy that none of the factors to which learners’ inappropriate behaviour and a lack of motivation are attributed in the literature reviewed above - including the instrumental nature of the vocational curriculum (Reeves, 1995; Halliday, 1999); weaknesses in the professional qualification for vocational teachers (Bleakley, 1999; Wallace, 2002); lack of learner choice and the pressures of market ideology (Perry, 1999); and the lack of professional cohesion among vocational teachers (Clow, 2001; Jephcote and Salisbury 2009) – were identified as significant factors by the focus group. Neither did they identify a lack of specific pedagogic skills on the part of teachers as contributing to learners’ disengagement.

#### *4.4 Summary of findings*

Taken together, the data from the observations and the focus group discussion suggest that learner disengagement is common across all vocational areas with the highest incidence to be found in the 14-19 age group enrolled for lower level (Level 2) qualifications. Links were identified between disengagement and learner deprivation; and between learner disengagement and attitudes learned in the home environment. No specific teaching strategies for motivation or control were identified as being consistently successful. However, there appeared to be a correlation between teachers’ ‘cheerfulness’ and positive levels of learner motivation and behaviour. This was also described in terms of teachers demonstrating a sense of humour and an ability to interact with groups of learners in ways that implied positive regard.

## **5 Conclusion**

Part of the purpose of this research project, as we saw in the Introduction, was to investigate how effectively teacher education and continuing professional development for the vocational sector is equipping teachers to motivate learners and manage non-compliant behaviour. However, although the evidence of this inquiry suggests that the disengagement of young learners in the UK’s vocational sector of education and training remains endemic, particularly at lower levels of the qualification framework, it raises important questions about whether this can be addressed by revisions to teacher training and continuous professional development programmes. It indicates, rather, that the key to motivating these learners - inasmuch as it lies with their teachers at all - consists in certain teacher attitudes and attributes rather than skills or strategies. Indeed, the findings appear to be consistent with the humanist theories of learning associated with Maslow (1987) and Rogers (1983), which argue that students’ more basic needs – for food, warmth, a sense of belonging – must be met before they can engage with the business of learning; and that a positive relationship between teacher and learner is a major factor in the motivation to learn. It is not easy to see how teachers’ development of such attributes, values and beliefs can be addressed by the existing instrumental and competence-based set of teaching standards. It remains to be seen whether the current policy initiative to

withdraw the standards and make teaching qualifications for the sector optional will prove any more successful in engaging the de-motivated and underachieving section of the student population.

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