

Excellence and Equity for All? An Investigation into the Contributing Factors to Early School Leaving and Youth Unemployment, Contextualised via Scotland's School Leavers' Outcomes

Brian McDermott, Headteacher, All Saints RC Secondary School, Glasgow
bmcdermott@allsaints-sec.glasgow.sch.uk

Cite this Article

McDermott, B. (2025). Excellence and equity for all? An investigation into the contributing factors to early school leaving and youth unemployment, contextualised via Scotland's school leavers' outcomes. *Journal of Leadership, Scholarship and Praxis in Education*, 1(1), 108–118.
<https://doi.org/10.36399/bfskp807>

Abstract

This paper explores the contributing factors associated with secondary-school-aged young people leaving school before or immediately after they reach the end of compulsory schooling. The paper also considers the relationship between leaving school at this point and transitioning to unemployment, identifying key overlapping thematic concerns. Additionally, the paper considers the impact of education policies designed to mitigate some of these risk factors and ensure equitable experiences and outcomes for learners in Scotland. Whilst there have been changes in post-school transition outcomes for Scottish school leavers during the identified policy lifespan (2009-2023), this paper points to a continued correlation between leaving school early and poorer overall outcomes for those young people in Scotland.

Keywords: early school leaving, Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET), school leaver outcomes, youth unemployment

Introduction

The overarching aim of the research conducted here is to better understand the variables, as identified in literature, which contribute to early school leaving: young people leaving school as soon as it is no longer compulsory (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2019), and to explore the relationship between leaving school early and progressing to a non-participatory (Not in Education, Employment or Training – “NEET”) post-school pathway (Macedo et al., 2020).

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have recognised a correlation between early school leaving and NEET (OECD, 2022a). There is also a suggested correlation between early school leaving and negative individual and societal consequences, such as poverty, poor physical and mental health, low self-esteem, low skilled workforce, and lower productivity (Brown, Olmos Rueda et al., 2021). Consequently, the OECD have placed emphasis on the importance of national policy mitigations to stem the flow of young people into NEET destinations (OECD, 2022a). Cognisant of this, and as a researcher-practitioner in Scotland, I have sought to consider some of the implications and impact of these identified risk factors and associated policy measures in a Scottish context.

There is no single agreed definition of NEET across the devolved countries of the UK (Maguire, 2015), with, for example, the distinction being between “positive destinations” and “other destinations” in a Scottish context (Scottish Government, 2023g). However, using the OECD’s measure (OECD, 2024), across the UK overall, the percentage of young people who were categorised as NEET in 2023 was 13.7%. In the last few years, the OECD average has improved from 16.1% in 2021 to 13.8% in 2023 (OECD, 2024), whereas the UK position has worsened from 13.4% to 13.7% across the same period. The UK sits 19th overall on this measure across the thirty-four OECD countries listed, well ahead of countries such as Turkey (31.1%) and ahead of Italy (18.7%) but behind countries such as Germany (9.6%) and Iceland (4.7%) (OECD, 2024).

Scottish Educational Context

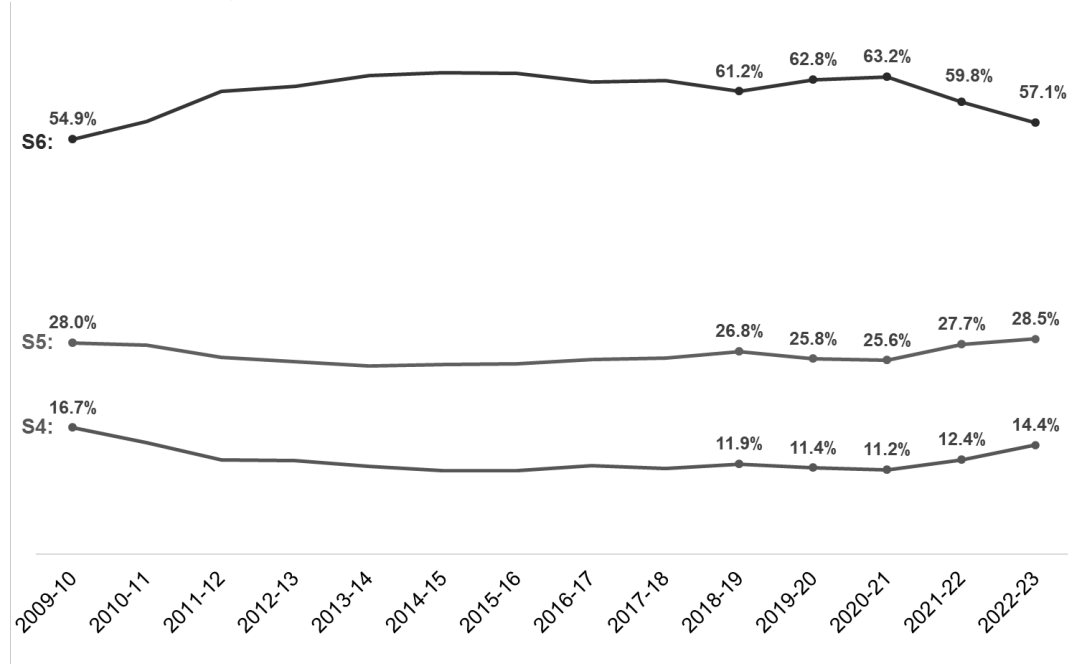
In Scotland, school ceases to be compulsory at the age of sixteen. This means young people reach school leaving age at either of the end of their fourth year of secondary (S4) or mid-way through their fifth year (S5), as they reach or approach the age of sixteen. This paper focuses on those young people who choose to leave as soon as they are no longer legally required to attend school.

Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2004, 2008) sets out clear “entitlements” for young people in Scotland, and the Scottish Government pledges to ensure “Excellence and Equity for All” (Scottish Government, 2016) communicating clear expectations around the importance of motivating and engaging learners and on meeting the needs of all young people, and particularly those who may require more opportunities to engage. In recognition of the risks associated with leaving school and transitioning to NEET and at a time of high unemployment across Europe (Scottish Government, 2014a), the Scottish Government instructed a review of Scotland’s response to youth unemployment, with a specific focus on how young people transitioned out of school (Scottish Government, 2014a). The subsequent report *Education Working for All* (Scottish Government, 2014a) highlighted data in the preceding five years showing that one in five young people aged 16-19 were not in education, employment, or training (Scottish Government, 2014). This report identified, among other factors, that young people who left school early often reported low levels of school belonging and they did not see that school had a purpose for them; they did not feel motivated or engaged and so chose to leave school as soon as possible. There was, in the context of this 2014 report, an apparent tension here between the policy aspirations of *Curriculum for Excellence* in ensuring the needs of all young people are satisfied, and the lived reality as experienced for a sizeable cohort of young people.

The main policy response to high levels of youth unemployment in Scotland, *Developing the Young Workforce: Scotland’s Youth Employment Strategy* was a seven-year plan launched in 2014 with the specific goal of reducing Scotland’s youth unemployment rates by 40% in the period up to 2021 (Scottish Government, 2014b). The impact of this response will be considered later in this paper. However, whilst there has been an increase overall in the number of young people attaining positive destinations post-school in the period since the policy inception, for example with 95.87% of all school leavers in Scotland attaining a positive destination in 2022-2023, with an average of 95.1% in the period 2019/20-2022/23 (Scottish Government, 2024) - for S6 leavers, this number was 97.75% in session 2022/23 with an average of 97.15% across the period 2019/20-2022/23 - the number remains lower for those leavers who leave school as soon as they have completed compulsory education at the end of S4, with 92.71% of the 7890 S4 leavers transitioning to a positive destination in 2022/23, averaging out at 90.9% across the same four-year period (Scottish Government, 2024). This means that on average, somewhere between 500-800 young people left school at the end of S4 each year across this period and did not progress to a positive destination. Of those who reside in the most deprived backgrounds, the average percentage of S4 leavers transitioning positively is 88.65% across this period (Scottish Government, 2024). It is worth considering the practical implications of this in the context of increasing numbers (in recent years) of young people in Scotland leaving school in S4, as conveyed in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1

Percentage of Secondary School Leavers by Stage of Leaving, 2009-10 to 2022-23 (Scottish Government, 2024)



The data points to an increase in the number of S4 leavers in the last five years. Where positive post-school outcomes are less likely for these leavers than for those who remain in school beyond the age of compulsory school education, there are implications for the education system in Scotland: schools and local authorities, further education providers, training providers, employers, and support agencies. Better understanding of the reasons why young people leave when they do will enhance the system's capacity to mitigate the risks through evidence-informed policy and practice.

Scottish Education Policy

I engaged in a critical policy analysis (Young & Diem, 2018) of key policy areas in the context of Scottish education to better understand how risk factors to early leaving and non-positive transitions were mitigated against in a Scottish context. The "critical practices" posited by Young and Diem, (2018) support the interrogation of policy and specifically support questions around the relationship between policy rhetoric and lived reality. Given my position as a headteacher in Scottish education, living much of the policy reality and impact, this was a useful approach. The identified policies are relevant to Scotland's stated ambitions around achieving Excellence and Equity for All, (Scottish Government, 2016, 2023e), Scotland's specific policy strategy designed to tackle youth unemployment, (Scottish Government, 2014b), and the stated entitlements young people have within Scottish education (Scottish Government, 2004, 2008).

The three policies referred to above point to high aspirations from the Scottish Government around the issues of equity and excellence for all young people:

- *The National Improvement Framework* (Scottish Government, 2016, 2023e) outlines key priorities at national level, and the commitment to annually review based on targeted data collection supports the Scottish Government to monitor progress relative to these targets.
- *Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Government, 2004, 2008) sets the national expectations around curricular provision including a series of entitlements which all young people should

expect to experience and enjoy. Within this framework, there is ambition around flexible and context-based planning which is designed to ensure that all young people can build their capacities and develop the skills and attributes required for their future and the future of Scottish society.

- *The Developing Scotland's Young Workforce* strategy (Scottish Government, 2014b) sets out the Scottish Government's expectations of what schools, colleges and other partners will do to support young people to be more work-ready and ultimately progress to a positive sustained destination.

In all three cases, whilst there have been successes relative to targeted areas and/or identified through review; it remains the case that there is a disconnect between the policy rhetoric and the lived reality of stakeholders: young people are still leaving school early and still attaining a non-positive destination. Within some cohorts this picture is improving, and this is validated by the data outlined above. In others, and worryingly, this applies to the most vulnerable and at-risk groups, the lived experience is quite different to what the policy documents espouse.

Review of Literature and Thematic Analysis

Increasingly, literature reviews are being utilised as a research methodology to support and inform in policy and practice development (Cohen et al., 2018). The objective in this case was to better understand what is known about this area (Gough et al., 2017), to acquire a greater knowledge of the phenomena identified (Cohen et al., 2018), and to consider these in my own context of Scotland, identifying where further or more specific research may be beneficial. To this end, my next step was to search for relevant literature (Cohen et al., 2018), by developing a search strategy (Gough et al., 2017) and through an iterative process, develop inclusion criteria and a method of screening the resulting findings (Gough et al., 2017). Using the identified literature, I employed Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to acquire and understand "patterns of meaning" from the substantial body of research in this area (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). Thematic links across the literature were identified and collated into a thematic map. From this, I was able to categorise consistently present risk factors which pertained to both early leaving and NEET: factors related to the individual; issues linked to families; relationships with peers, teachers and support staff; issues around school systems and structures; and expectations and factors pertaining to wider society.

Key Findings

There is consensus across the identified literature that both early leaving and NEET are areas which impact in a significant way on individuals and society (Brown, Olmos Rueda et al., 2021; Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2019; Macedo et al., 2020). There is also agreement that risk factors associated with each are multidimensional and multifactorial in nature. The key findings of the literature review are summarised and discussed below.

Personal Challenges

The main findings across the literature in this area pointed to young people who left school early conveying low self-esteem, low self-confidence, low motivation to learn, and feelings of isolation or exclusion from school (Brown, Olmos Rueda et al., 2021; Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2019; Lórinč et al., 2020; Maguire, 2015; Olmos Rueda & Sallan, 2021; Pendergast et al., 2018; Pesquera Alonso et al., 2022; Van Den Berghe et al., 2022). Linked to these feelings, the referenced research pointed to young people with low levels of academic attainment, experiences of academic failure, low levels of educational performance, negative self-perceptions around academic achievement and low

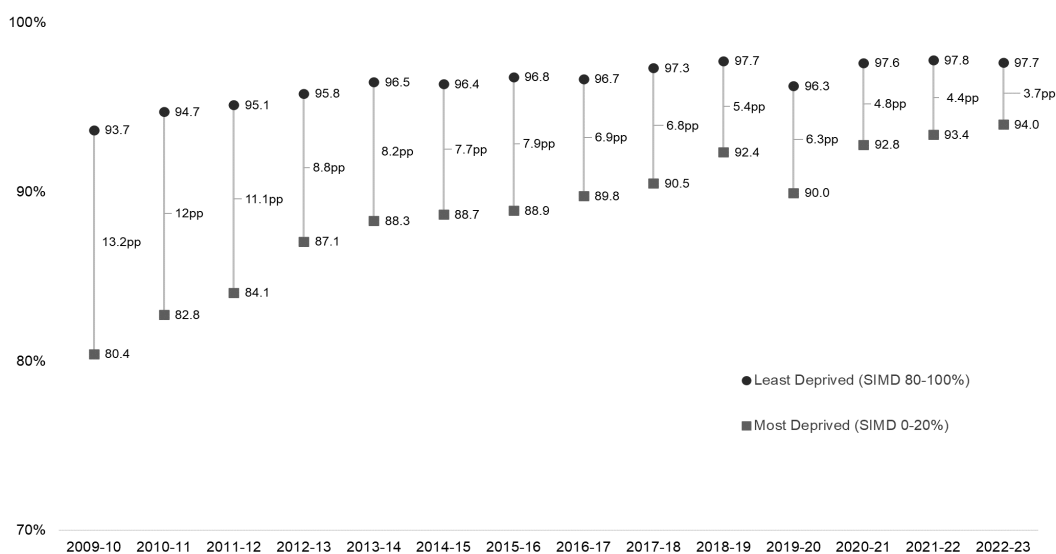
expectations around what could be achieved in education (Brown, Olmos Rueda et al., 2021; Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2019; Lórinç et al., 2020; Maguire, 2015; Olomos Rueda and Sallan, 2021; Pendergast et al., 2018; Pesquera Alonso et al., 2022; Van Den Berghe et al., 2022).

Pendergast’s (2018) study revealed that it was in middle school (ages 12-15) where the feelings of low school belonging became more prominent, suggesting that there is potentially a disconnect between how young people experience the early/primary school years and their lived experience of the secondary education. In addition, in a Scottish context, the OECD (2015) point to an apparent disconnect between the vision of Curriculum for Excellence and the lived experience of young people when they transitioned from the Broad General Education (S1-S3) to the Senior Phase (S4-S6) suggesting that the assessment and examination system was inconsistent with this vision and also pointing to this having implications on the Broad General Education as this was more and more being used as a runway for the Senior Phase. Personal challenges are prevalent across the referenced literature, largely around how young people see themselves, how they think they fit into school and education and how equipped they feel in readiness to meet the challenges consistent with progression to adulthood. These feelings are contributing to young people’s decision-making around leaving school.

Family Circumstances

Risk factors in this category were found to relate to two primary areas: socioeconomic status of families and parental experiences and attitudes towards education. In summary, there was a correlation between lower socioeconomic status, less positive parental experiences of education (including academic levels of parents) and higher levels of early school leaving and NEET (Gonzalez-Rodriguez et al., 2019; Noh & Lee, 2017; Olmos Rueda & Sallan, 2021; Pendergast et al., 2018; Van Der Berghe et al., 2022). As indicated earlier, there is a lack of qualitative research in a Scottish context into early school leaving and NEET; however, the Scottish Government (2024) provide data annually on leavers cohorts, shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Percentage of Mainstream Secondary School Leavers in a Positive Initial Destination by SIMD quintile, 2009/10 to 2022/23 (Scottish Government, 2024)



Each year since 2009-10, a lower percentage of those who are the most deprived 20%, have progressed to positive destinations, relative to the 20% least deprived. Whilst at whole cohort level,

there have been improvements and this particular gap is closing, there is still a clear link in Scotland between family circumstances and a non-positive destination. Specific data about the early leavers (S4) cohort in relation to socioeconomic status would be useful but single cohort data on this metric is not available via the Scottish Government's data set. It is likely, given the patterns emerging from the other data cited, that this gap would be wider.

The Scottish Government, for example, through the Scottish Attainment Challenge (2015), have provided additional targeted funding, Pupil Equity Funding (Scottish Government, 2023g), to support various interventions to mitigate family circumstances. This funding is based on the socioeconomic status of families: their qualification for free school meals. As is clear from the literature, however, there is no single root cause of early school leaving or those in NEET; there is an interconnection between multiple factors. This is a macro and meso level policy challenge (Priestley et al, 2021), given the Scottish Government's priorities and their filtration through the system, but it is also a challenge at micro level (Priestley et al., 2021): it is very difficult to meaningfully mitigate the impact of family circumstances on early leaving and non-participation when the impact is so wide and interconnected.

Social Relationships

The key findings identified in this area of risk factor were around young people's experiences and interpretations of peer and adult relationships. Young people were more likely to disengage and/or leave school early where they did not have positive peer relationships or did not feel that they had a teacher or adult in the educational setting with whom they could connect (Brown, Olmos Rueda et al., 2021; Pendergast et al., 2018; Schmitsek, 2022). Peer relationships were deemed highly significant (Brown, Olmos Rueda et al., 2021) where the peer group's attitude was anti-school; this was more prevalent in young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, again highlighting the interconnection between risk factors. Young people felt more invested in school when they had a fulfilling social connection, where they felt they belonged and they mattered (Pendergast et al., 2018). Young people's identification of a key adult with whom they have a positive, supportive relationship is important and could support and add purpose to early warning systems in a school setting, for example. Additionally, in a Scottish context, it is an entitlement for all young people to have *personal support* to maximise opportunities across the curriculum (Scottish Government, 2008); further focused research on the experiences of this provision in the context of Scottish young people who have left school early or progressed to NEET, would add useful knowledge to this area for practitioners and inform intervention where required.

The young people in this research (Pendergast et al., 2018) consistently pointed to the importance of seeking a sense of personal identity among peers. Where the influences around this transition were not positive, there was a higher risk of disengagement. Again, the literature points to a correlation between a higher risk of negative influences for those with lower socioeconomic status. Much of the research here was conducted with young people who had already disengaged and/or who were either NEET or had recently re-engaged. This both supports and limits the findings, in my view: in the first instance, this research (Pendergast et al., 2018) is directly involving young people impacted by these risk factors; they can recognise and articulate their lived experience of this reality. Conversely, for those who had recently re-engaged, their perception of previous reality could be biased by the positive experiences they enjoy via re-engagement.

Institutional Features

The main findings in this area pointed to risks associated with school culture and environment, school policies, a perception that school systems were too rigid and inflexible, a lack of appropriate pathways and teaching methodologies which were not deemed to meet the needs of all; there were areas of overlap again with other identified factors (Brown, Díaz-Vicario, 2021; Macedo et al., 2020; Pendergast et al., 2018; Schmitsek, 2022; Van Der Berghe et al., 2022). Young people across this research, highlighted that they found the expectations of schooling to be a source of tension. They did not like the rigid timetabling; the requirement to sit behind a desk and to use textbooks; the lack of flexibility in terms of what they studied and how they studied; they felt that the language used by teachers towards them was too authoritative; they cited a lack of appropriate progression pathways and issues with the need to sit traditional examinations; they felt that their educational experience lacked relevance.

Whilst again, there is a lack of qualitative data to contextualise this in a Scottish context and this would be useful to build awareness and capacity in the system around the perceptions of institutional features amongst school-aged young people in Scotland; there are elements of the findings here which I can recognise as a school leader in Scotland. In this context, the institutional risks of early leaving and NEET are, it could be argued, mitigated against through some of the structural factors implemented in Scotland. For example, the ideals behind Curriculum for Excellence were designed to allow practitioners flexibility in terms of curriculum planning and delivery; the rhetoric points to there being less need for inflexible and rigid approaches. Young people are *entitled* to exercise agency through *personalisation* as they progress through the curriculum, they should get more say in what they learn and study; there is a focus, as one of the “Principles of Curriculum Design”, to ensure that learning is *relevant*, so young people can recognise the purpose of their learning (Scottish Government, 2004, 2008). Moreover, Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce (Scottish Government, 2014b) places demands on Scottish schools to ensure that there is greater awareness and access to a wide range of pathways through and post-school, again contributing to flexibility and choice for young people and mitigating some of these risks. Indeed, there has been an increase in the number of SCQF 6 level vocational qualifications undertaken by young people in Scotland in recent years, peaking in session 2022-23 (Scottish Government, 2024).

Whilst it has already been shown that for the most part, levels of successful transition from school have improved across Scotland for the *all school leavers cohort*; the number of successful transitions for early (S4) leavers, has remained lower (Scottish Government, 2024). Moreover, the percentage of S4 leavers in Scotland has increased from 11.1% in 2014/15 to 14.4% in 2022/23 (Scottish Government, 2024); one interpretation of this increase, substantiated via the consistency of non-positive destination figures across this period for the S4 leavers cohort, is that the measures implemented are not effectively mitigating early leaving or transition to NEET for all young people.

Structural Factors

There is overlap in this area across the other categories of risk factor. The research identified a high prevalence of issues associated with perceptions around education policy, particularly around performativity measures (Brown, Díaz-Vicario, et al., 2021; Olmos Rueda & Sallan, 2021; Pendergast et al., 2018) and a lack of non-academic pathways (Macedo et al., 2020; Noh and Lee, 2017). Across the research cited above, patterns were cited around participants’ views that for many of them, not fitting the mould and following a traditional academic pathway resulted in marginalisation and disengagement. They reported feelings that they mattered less in school than their more traditionally academic peers, that their teachers did not focus as much on them and had lower expectations. This could resonate with many of the other categories of risk factor identified earlier with low self-esteem, a lack of self-confidence and a negative academic self-image fuelled in a context perceived in this way. This is arguably a strong example of where activity and expectations at the macro/meso levels has implications at micro and nano level (Priestley et al., 2021): local authorities enact national

government attainment policies (macro > meso) and school leaders, driven by a performativity agenda from their local authority, (meso > micro), create or oversee cultures of accountability and performance measurement. The result is that teachers focus on only what is measured, and pupils only feel that they matter if what they do is measurable (nano) (Priestley et al., 2021).

In the Scottish system and in my experience, the measures with most social capital, i.e. those which are valued most by local authorities, further and higher education establishments and by employers, have traditionally been National Qualifications at levels five and six, assessed and certificated via traditional examinations. Pathways that do not sit within this system, do not have parity (Scottish Government, 2022). Post-Covid-19, the Scottish Government ordered a review into the Scottish system (Scottish Government, 2022, 2023a, 2023c; OECD, 2022b). The recommendations arising out of the review process point to a rethinking of the rigid, inflexible, high-stakes examination system experienced by so many. These recommendations followed prior reviews of the Scottish curriculum (OECD, 2015, 2021) with the latter directly referring to the need to reconceptualise the Senior Phase of Scottish education, aligning it more closely with the Broad General Education. In practice, this *should* mean that the Senior Phase experienced by young people in Scotland in years to come, more closely correlates to the ideals of Curriculum for Excellence. In the context of early school leaving and transition to NEET, this *should* mean that there is a much wider range of pathways with parity of capital, mitigating the sense of marginalisation and subsequent disengagement reported because of structural features. Further research into the lived experiences of young people should be undertaken once this new system is embedded, and quantitative analysis of the impact this has on leavers cohorts in terms of destinations and highest level of qualification attained will support further intervention and support at cohort level.

Conclusion

It is clear from the literature that there is no single causal effect of early school leaving and NEET transition, however, both early leaving and NEET share a number of characteristics and there is a clear, though not inevitable, relationship between the two. The research points to an interconnectedness between risk factors, with personal challenges and family circumstances, especially socioeconomic status, mediating the others. Where young people lack self-esteem, and self-confidence, where they feel that school is not necessarily a place for them due to perceptions around their ability to learn and to achieve, there is an increased probability that they will leave school as soon as possible. Young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely than their more affluent counterparts to leave school early and, where there is a lack of positive peer and/or adult relationships or where there are anti-school views at home or within peer groups – either due to negative experiences of school or a lack of importance placed on school-based education – young people are more likely to leave school early. Where young people find the structure and expectations of the school day: the building, the timetable, the setup in learning environments, the teacher-pupil relationship, difficult to adhere to, they are more likely to leave school early. Personal and family circumstances exacerbate the latter. Finally, where young people feel that they do not fit with a performativity agenda, meaning they do not feel that they can or wish to contribute to the high-performance requirements of school education, namely exam success, they are more likely to leave school early.

The lack of available research in the Scottish education context limits my ability to make concrete connections between identified risk factors across the literature and the specifics of the lived experience of young people in Scotland, beyond the correlation between leaving age and post-school destination. Despite the policy rhetoric (Scottish Government, 2016), however, there remains a sizeable minority of young people for whom the lived experience does not correlate with the espoused vision. Scottish education is in a period of flux and with this comes opportunities to

address some of the issues in the system (Scottish Government, 2022, 2023a, 2023c). A system, more cognisant of and better equipped to mitigate the risk factors associated with early school leaving and transition to a negative post-school destination, could contribute far more effectively to the vision of excellence and equity for all.

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Brown, C., Olmos Rueda, P., Costas Batlle, I., & Sallán, J. C. (2021). Introduction to the special issue: A conceptual framework for researching the risks to early leaving. *Journal of Education and Work*, 34(78), 723–739. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2021.2003007>
- Brown, C., Díaz-Vicario, A., Costas Batlle, I., & Muñoz Moreno, J. L. (2021). Comparing early leaving across Spain and England: Variation and commonality across two nations of high and low relative early leaving rates. *Journal of Education and Work*, 34(7–8), 740–764. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2021.1983526>
- Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), 297–298, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262613>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education* (8th ed.). Routledge.
- González-Rodríguez, D., Vieira, M. J., & Vidal, J. (2019). Factors that influence early school leaving: A comprehensive model. *Educational Research*, 61(2), 214–230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2019.1596034>
- Gough, D., Oliver, S., & Thomas, J. (2017). *An introduction to systematic reviews*. Sage.
- Lórinç, M., Ryan, L., D'Angelo, A., & Kaye, N. (2020). De-individualising the 'NEET problem': An ecological systems analysis. *European Educational Research Journal*, 19(5), 412–427. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904119880402>
- Macedo, E., Nairz-Wirth, E., Araújo, H. C., & Szalai, J. (2020). Drawing lessons from early school leavers in a social justice context: Introductory comments. *European Educational Research Journal*, 19(5), 387–397. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904120951658>
- Noh, H., & Lee, B. J. (2017). Risk factors of NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) in South Korea: An empirical study using panel data. *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development*, 27(1), 28–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02185385.2017.1289860>
- Maguire, S. (2021). Early leaving and the NEET agenda across the UK. *Journal of Education and Work*, 34(7-8), 826–838. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2021.1983525>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2015). *Improving schools in Scotland: An OECD perspective*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264249443-en>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2021). *Scotland's curriculum for excellence: Into the future, implementing education policies*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/bf624417-en>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2022a). *Education at a glance 2022: OECD Indicators*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/3197152b-en>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2022b). *Upper-secondary education student assessment in Scotland: A comparative perspective*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/d8785ddf-en>

- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2024). *Education at a glance 2024: OECD Indicators*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en>
- Olmos Rueda, P., & Sallán, J. G. (2021). Understanding and intervening in the personal challenges and social relationships risk categories to early leaving. *Journal of Education and Work*, 34(7–8), 855-871. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2021.1997016>
- Pendergast D., Allen J., McGregor G., & Ronksley-Pavia M. (2018). Engaging marginalized, “at-risk” middle-level students: A focus on the importance of a sense of belonging at school. *Education Sciences*, 8(3), 138. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci8030138>
- Pesquera Alonso, C., Muñoz Sánchez, P., & Iniesta Martínez, A. (2022). Is there a uniform NEET identity in the European Union? *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 27(1), 207–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2022.2065922>
- Priestley, M., Alvunger, D., Philippou, S., & Soini, T. (2021). *Curriculum making in Europe: Policy and practice within and across diverse contexts*. Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Scottish Government. (2004). *Curriculum for excellence: The curriculum review group*.
- Scottish Government. (2008). *Curriculum for excellence: Building the curriculum 3: A framework for learning and teaching*. <https://education.gov.scot/documents/btc3.pdf>
- Scottish Government. (2014a). *Education working for all: Developing Scotland’s young workforce, final report*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-working-commission-developing-scotlands-young-workforce-final-report/>
- Scottish Government. (2014b). *Developing the young workforce: Scotland’s youth employment strategy*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/developing-young-workforce-scotlands-youth-employment-strategy/>
- Scottish Government. (2016). *National Improvement Framework for Scottish education: Achieving excellence and equity*.
- Scottish Government. (2015). *Scottish attainment challenge*. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/schools/pupil-attainment/>
- Scottish Government. (2022). *Putting learners at the centre: Towards a future vision for Scottish education*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/putting-learners-centre-towards-future-vision-scottish-education/>
- Scottish Government. (2023a). *It's our future - Independent review of qualifications and assessment*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/future-report-independent-review-qualifications-assessment/>
- Scottish Government. (2023b). *National Improvement Framework (NIF) and improvement plan summary document*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/2023-national-improvement-framework-nif-improvement-plan-summary-document/>
- Scottish Government. (2023c). *All learners in Scotland matter: The national discussion on education, final report*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/learners-scotland-matter-national-discussion-education-final-report/>
- Scottish Government. (2023d). *Summary statistics for attainment and initial leaver destinations, no. 5: 2023 edition*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-attainment-initial-leaver-destinations-no-5-2023-edition/>
- Scottish Government. (2023e). *Achieving excellence and equity. National Improvement Framework and improvement plan 2023*. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/achieving-excellence-equity-2023-national-improvement-framework-improvement-plan/>

- Scottish Government. (2023f). *The impact of Scotland's developing young workforce strategy on education: The lines between*.
- Scottish Government. (2023g). *The Scottish attainment challenge, 2022/23-2025/26*
<https://www.gov.scot/policies/schools/pupil-attainment/>
- Scottish Government. (2024). *Summary statistics for attainment and initial leaver destinations, no. 6: 2024 edition. Supplementary tables. February 2024*.
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-attainment-initial-leaver-destinations-no-6-2024-edition/documents/>
- Schmitsek, S. (2022). 'Who are you to know who I am?' Comparing the experiences of youth at risk of dropping out in England, Denmark and Hungary. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 52(2), 173–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2020.1747984>
- Van Den Berghe, L. Vandeveldel, L., & De Pauw, S. W. (2022). School dropout as the result of a complex interplay between individual and environmental factors: A study on the perspectives of support workers. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 28(5), 603–617.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2022.2062748>
- Young, M. D., & Diem, S. (2018). Doing critical policy analysis in education research: An emerging paradigm. In C. R. Lochmiller (Ed.), *Complementary research methods for educational leadership and policy studies*. Palgrave MacMillan, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93539-3_5

Author Biography

Brian McDermott

bmcdermott@allsaints-sec.glasgow.sch.uk



Brian McDermott is Headteacher of All Saints' RC Secondary School in the North East of Glasgow, a school of just over 900 pupils. Brian has taught in seven secondary schools across three Local Authorities, as a Teacher of English, a Principal Teacher of Pupil Support and a Depute Head Teacher. Brian was co-lead of Glasgow's Thinking about Senior Leadership Professional Learning Programme for five years. He has been Headteacher in All Saints' since March 2020. He completed his MEd (Educational Leadership) with Merit at the University of Glasgow's School of Education in 2023.