

# EXPLORING SOURCES OF CONSENSUS AND DISAFFECTION IN ALTERNATIVE PROVISION PROVIDED BY THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY IN THE UK

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Alternative provision (AP) is where young people at risk of exclusion because of their behaviour are removed from mainstream education into alternative forms of education. This research explores construction AP delivered by five organisations, using the work of Basil Bernstein as the theoretical approach on the sources of consensus and disaffection in education. Disaffection arises when students cannot or will not accept the expressive order (conduct, behaviour) and/or the instrumental order (knowledge, skills) of the school. Drawing on interviews with construction trainers and social value teams working in construction AP, this research makes an important new contribution to construction education research by showing how training young people on a live construction site encourages improvements in behaviour as young people learn the appropriate behaviours for working in the industry. In addition to improving behaviour and gaining the skills and qualifications needed to access employment opportunities in the construction industry, young people can continue to learn mainstream academic subjects such as maths. It is concluded that Bernstein's theoretical approach is useful for understanding the construction industry's contribution to educating young people at risk of exclusion.

Keywords: Alternative provision; Bernstein; education; schools; exclusion

## INTRODUCTION

Despite the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic downturn, the construction industry continues growing and faces severe skills shortages in many countries. For example, the UK construction industry must recruit 45,000 people per year over the next five years to meet the expected output in the UK because of an ageing workforce, a decreasing number of new entrants to the industry and competition internationally for skilled workers worsened by BREXIT (CITB, 2023, Brooks and McIlwaine, 2021). In Australia, in 2023, labour demand is projected to grow by 42,000 to a peak of 442,000, more than double the projected available labour supply (Infrastructure Australia 2022). Chan and Connolly (2006) suggest that the industry's poor image affects recruitment and makes it challenging to recruit the workforce needed to deliver the growing output of the UK. Brooks and

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McIlwaine (2021) suggest that it is time the industry tells a better story of the prospects available, given its negative public image around its relatively poor health and safety (H&S) record, masculinised and exclusionary culture, long working hours, insecure work, poor mental health and well-being and a poor working environment.

Workforce diversification is recognised as one way the construction industry can address its skills shortage challenges and poor public image (Infrastructure Australia, 2021). In most countries, it is one of the largest employing sectors. It offers a wide range of jobs for an equally wide variety of people, from professional managers to tradespeople to manual labourers (Michielsens, 2016). It is also a significant potential source of employment for many non-traditional groups who can help address skills shortages, such as people with a disability; migrants and refugees; Indigenous people; young people at risk; and ex-offenders, although many face discrimination in the industry (Loosemore *et al.*, 2020; Bailey *et al.*, 2022). While the pathways for entry into the construction industry for many of these groups have been explored, one group which has received relatively little attention are children and young people in school. Even less attention has been paid to those school students who are at risk of failing and disengagement from education because they struggle with traditional classroom-based education. However, in many countries, school leavers are encouraged to pursue academic pathways in preference to trade qualifications despite the latter providing important pathways into work for such students (Callanan and Perri 2020, Australian Government 2018). Although a few studies have examined the difference school-based interventions can make in encouraging young people to consider a career in construction, this tends to be in mainstream education settings and on career guidance rather than alternative provision (AP) (see, for example, Chan and Connolly, 2006). Conversely, research in America has found that school pre-apprenticeship programmes are instrumental in supporting socio-economically disadvantaged groups into the industry (Bruno *et al.*, 2016). Furthermore, in Australia, Taylor (2004) examined a school-based vocational construction programme and found it beneficial in preparing students for transitions from school to work by giving them practical training and work experience in a real working environment. In the UK, Loosemore and Bridgeman (2017) examined a construction industry-led school engagement programme where school pupils, in mainstream education, interacted with construction industry professionals, visited sites and completed individual and team assignments to learn about various roles in the industry. Loosemore and Bridgeman's (2017) study examined what motivated professionals from the industry to volunteer on the programme and found that volunteers derived many benefits including reinforcing existing skills and developing stronger internal and external relationships. In contrast, this research explores construction interventions delivered to young people in AP and how young people in AP can be helped to overcome barriers and meet the future skills needs of industry, constructing for the future.

Despite these encouraging albeit limited insights into the potentially positive impacts of exposing school students to construction work as part of their formal education, the role that 'alternative provision' can play in recruiting people to work in the construction industry has yet to receive any research attention. The term alternative provision (AP) describes the wide range of interventions where pupils at risk of disengagement from education are provided with a range of complementary vocational, academic, life skills, therapeutic, work skills, work experience, environmental and creative education (Trotman *et al.*, 2018; Thomson and Russell, 2009). Children and young people suited to AP are likely to have struggled to cope

with mainstream education and be at risk of or have been permanently excluded from school. In research on AP in Australia, McGregor and Mills (2012, p. 858) found that students in AP valued practical and vocational AP approach as it was 'real life, hands-on and connected', especially if these courses could help with employment; Research has found that practical AP programmes can captivate students' interest and new ways of learning can have a positive impact on students' experiences of learning and can lead to improved behaviour (Hickey *et al.*, 2020).

However, concerns have been raised that while AP programmes may have valuable outcomes for some young people, they seldom lead to a qualification, exacerbating later disadvantages (te Riele, 2007). The literature on AP points to a messy landscape of alternative provision, a need for more evidence of effectiveness and insufficient research on the longitudinal outcomes of young people in such programmes (Thomson and Russell, 2009; Malcolm, 2018). It is essential to examine AP because its use needs to be clarified, particularly when compared to the focus of both policy and research on exclusions (Malcolm, 2018). While some AP programmes offer construction training, work-based vocational skills, and work experience there needs to be research into these programmes' nature, implementation and value. This paper aims to address this gap in research by utilising Bernstein's (2003) theory of consensus and disaffection in education to explore the following research questions:

1. What different types of AP does the construction industry deliver?
2. How is construction training delivered to young people who have struggled with behaviour (the expressive order) in school in a highly regulated industry?
3. What skills and knowledge can construction training offer young people who have struggled with academic learning (the instrumental order)?

By addressing these questions, this research contributes new theoretical and practical insights into the role of the construction industry in delivering AP, how the industry can widen its recruitment based to address skills shortages and how it meets growing requirements to provide employment and training opportunities for disadvantaged people in the communities in which it builds (Raideen *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, this research contributes to the advancement of Bernstein's (2003) theories which have hitherto been restricted to examining the trajectories of academically able students (Power *et al.*, 1998) and examining inequalities in higher education (Donnelly, 2018).

## Theory

Bernstein's (2003) theory of consensus and disaffection in education provides a new theoretical lens to understand the potential of AP to help address the construction industry's skills shortages. Bernstein (2003) explains that the sources of consensus and disaffection should be understood by exploring the relationship between the school's culture and the orientation of the family to that culture. However, there is more to consider than just the relationship between families and schools; there is also the culture of the school to consider. Bernstein identifies two distinct but interrelated kinds of behaviour that are present in schools: the expressive order and the instrumental order (Bernstein, 2003). The expressive order involves pupils' conduct, character, and manner; this concerns the appropriateness of conduct in school, where compliance is necessary (Bernstein, 2003). The instrumental order involves acquiring specific skills and knowledge and captures acquiring educational qualifications (Bernstein, 2003). Bernstein (2003) explains that disaffection arises when students cannot or will not accept the expressive and instrumental order within a school environment and consensus occurs when pupils accept both the expressive and

instrumental orders. Bernstein (2003) also explains that there can be tension between instrumental and expressive orders within schools. For example, in the instrumental order, when students are placed in groups and defined by their ability level to develop some specific skills, divisions can be created between pupils and between pupils and teachers. Nevertheless, at the same time, the expressive order is expected to be conveyed by the whole school in terms of its externally perceived image, internal codes of conduct, character and the 'moral order' (Bernstein, 2003, p. 34). Bernstein (2003) also argues that pupils who are weakly involved in the instrumental order are less likely to be receptive to the moral order of the school.

By highlighting the tensions between the two orders in schools, Bernstein's (2003) theory represents a potentially valuable approach to examining construction AP because the highly regulated, high-risk, and highly skilled and process-driven nature of construction work requires compliance with both instrumental and expressive orders. For example, Bernstein's (2003) theory helps examine whether pupils who had challenges following school rules in school (the expressive order) will be able to follow the many regulations (such as Occupational Health and Safety) which require workers to behave appropriately on a construction site. While compliance is considered necessary in schools, it is considered critical and potentially lifesaving in the construction industry. Construction work is also practical and hands-on. Previous AP research has found that young people prefer this learning environment and can help reengage them in education (for example, see Hickey *et al.*, 2020). So, while there may be tensions between the expressive and instrumental orders in a school environment, young people might behave appropriately on a construction site because of the regulatory requirement to do so and the risk to themselves and others if they do not and because they enjoy hands-on learning.

## **METHOD**

Following an interpretative phenomenology approach (Neubauer *et al.*, 2019), data was collected via semi-structured interviews with professionals implementing five construction AP programmes in the UK. Programs were selected because they delivered construction training where school pupils were removed from a classroom in a mainstream school or a pupil referral unit (PRU). A PRU is a type of school for young people who cannot cope with the demands of mainstream education. The interviews were undertaken between December 2021 and July 2022 and undertaken by a team of researchers from construction and education backgrounds. Informed by Bernstein's (2003) theoretical concepts of consensus and disaffection, the interviews aimed to explore the culture of construction AP particularly concerning the expressive and instrumental orders described in Bernstein's sources of consensus and disaffection. Interviews lasted one to two hours, and questions focussed on exploring how they worked with children and young people; what their intervention involved; what they did differently than schools or PRUs and what were the outputs and outcomes for children and young people.

Semi-structured interviews were valuable in collecting data because they generated 'information-rich' depth insights into the particularly concerning the expressive and instrumental orders in each AP program. This 'exploratory' approach was also sympathetic to the uncertain and evolving nature of the construction AP, the interpretivist nature of our research and the lack of priori research in this area, which prevented a positivist hypothesis-testing approach. This required an approach which respected respondents' individual AP experiences and enabled respondents to express

these in their own terms. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis following protocols by Guest *et al.*, (2012). Our analytic starting points were our research questions and Bernstein’s (2003) theoretical concepts of consensus and disaffection. The first step involved researchers immersing themselves in the data by repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to obtain a high level of familiarity with the data. Second, researchers conducted open (inductive) and directed (deductive) coding (based on Bernstein’s (2003) theoretical concepts of consensus and disaffection), organising and generating an initial list of items/codes (first-order coding) from the data set that had a reoccurring pattern. Third, researchers searched for recurring patterns, linkages, categories, and subcategories within the first-order codes relating to each research question. Forth, researchers examined how codes combined to form overarching themes relating to the research questions. In the fifth and final stages, emergent themes were further refined by continued searches for data that supported or refuted the initial themes, allowing further expansion and connections between overlapping themes. This process continued in parallel with data collection until theoretical saturation occurred, and no other themes emerged. Any instances of disagreement were resolved through discussion, which continued until 100% inter-rater agreement was achieved, providing a high level of 'fit' with the data and confidence in the theoretical validity of the emergent themes.

Table 1: The Sample

Participant	Position	Organisation	AP Intervention delivered
1	Apprenticeship Coordinator	Housing Maintenance	Practical construction workshops delivered using an industry toolkit to pupils struggling in mainstream education.
2	Business Development Manager	Construction Training Company	Groundworks training, including driving construction vehicles on a live construction site to pupils from a local PRU.
3	Social Value Manager	Construction Company	Careers advice and practical construction workshops delivered on live construction sites to pupils from a local PRU.
4	Training Manager	Environmental organisation	Providing a full-time timetable of AP, including plumbing, carpentry, photography, cookery, and bike maintenance.
5	Head of pre-16 Training	Vocational training organisation	A range of vocational options, including bricklaying, carpentry and painting and decorating.

## FINDINGS

Regarding research question one about the different types of construction, AP delivered in the UK. All five organisations delivered different types of AP in different settings. Participant 1 worked for the housing maintenance organisation and worked in schools where ‘pupils lacked opportunities’ as part of their social value commitments, explaining, 'we have got to give back to our communities and tackle skills shortages because there is such a shortage of tradespeople.' They delivered workshops from an industry toolkit designed to complement the school curriculum, including plumbing, electrical, painting and decorating and carpentry workshops for pupils struggling in mainstream education. Participant 2 worked for a commercial construction training organisation that aimed to tackle skills shortages explaining that ‘construction is always carpentry, plastering, blockwork, brickwork plumbing, and electrical. Those routes get promoted, not necessarily the plant or the groundworks.’ They worked with learners from a local PRU. They were refurbishing an old colliery site explaining that pupils were not just learning; they were 'building the classrooms, clearing all the grounds and contributing to the work on the site itself.' Their scheme

of work included 'manual handling, first aid, dumper truck training and H&S training.'

Participant 3 worked for a construction company building an extension for a PRU; they were 'lucky to be on site', which made engagement easier. They could provide pupils with practical taster sessions, including bricklaying, tiling, plastering and carpentry. They also delivered employability sessions, including careers advice, mock interviews, and CV workshops. Participant 4 worked for an environmental organisation that delivered 'plumbing, cookery, carpentry art and photography.' Pupils came to them if they were 'having difficulties in school' They had purpose-built classrooms in the environmental organisation's factory. Participant 5 worked for a vocational training provider; they had developed a pre-16 AP provision. Because when 16-year-olds came to them, it was too late. They had the 'skill set, but they weren't able to progress because their English and maths were weak.' They had tutors from 'real life industry backgrounds' delivering a range of vocational options. In construction, they covered bricklaying, carpentry and painting and decorating.

In answering research question two to explore how the construction industry worked with pupils who have struggled with behaviour (the expressive order) in a highly regulated industry, participant 1 and participant 3, had concerns about behaviour from an H&S point of view. Participant 1 explained that because they worked with 'groups that were not in the mainstream classroom', they kept 'numbers at a minimum for workshops' so they could 'control the situation.' Participant 3 reflected that the pupils in the PRU they were working in had previously not engaged with employers because they were 'deemed as unemployable' and 'struggled with any career support.' Participant 3 initially tried a careers talk, but 'pupils were a bit naughty; they did not want to be there.' Instead, they delivered practical sessions, including 'bricklaying, plastering and tiling.' Conversely, participant 2 explained that because 'they do a different type of engagement, in a real-working environment,' they had 'tight control measures.' They explained to pupils, 'your behaviours need to be this way because of this.' It is all about 'raised awareness', which is 'specific to the construction sector. But that's who we are; that is what we are.'

Both participants 1 and 3 reflected that although there were some issues, the practical construction workshops had worked well. Participant 1 explained that when pupils 'were busy doing something not classed as a classroom subject, you saw a completely different side to them; they were enthusiastic, and they were quite happy to get hands-on and get messy with the grout and the paints.' This led to an increase in confidence 'when they saw the results of what they did.' Participant 1 continued, 'teachers' response was positive because they couldn't get over how well-behaved they were and how polite they were, how they responded to doing something different, which was good.' Participant 3 explained that their practical workshops went well despite initial concerns about behaviour:

*It was fab. They were busy; they were hands-on. They were able to do something that wasn't in a classroom, and they were somewhere new; they were very well behaved, which we were concerned about what they might be like, when they're in that environment, from a Health and Safety, point of view. They did a really good job, and the bricklayers were impressed with their skills.*

Participant 4 explained that they teach the 'hardest to teach.' In terms of behaviour, they also described the satisfaction they felt when they 'succeeded.' They attributed improvements in behaviour to a student-teacher ratio of one to six and a hands-on alternative curriculum. Moreover, they had a robust induction process because of the

factory setting and the practical nature of the construction training. Participant 5 described the common theme for all their learners: 'they've all been kicked out from school' with some having a 'complexity of need.' Nonetheless, they explained that their 'starter is to rebuild their faith in adults and education and then build rapport and then teach them.' If they got them in time, they 'could see a complete change' in behaviour. Explaining that staff had 'different approaches' including staff from the construction sector, which 'really helped.'

In answering research question three about the skills and knowledge the construction industry could offer young people struggling with academic learning (the instrumental order), practical construction workshops had been designed to contextualise the national curriculum; the practical construction activities were a carrot for more practical experience and when giving careers advice people in the industry explained why academic subjects such as maths were vital if they wanted to progress into a construction career. Participant 1 explained to pupils that construction was not just about 'the tiling and the wallpapering; you've got to have the academic side as well.' Explaining that the workshops were 'part of the curriculum. So, they're learning without realising. Doing a bit of science.' Although they did not offer qualifications, they did offer work experience opportunities and the chance for pupils to progress to an apprenticeship when they left school.

Participant 2 explained that although most of their work was on a live construction site, they did 'classroom-based stuff and then went out and drove the machines. They hate doing maths; they hate writing. The machines are the carrot. They love the machines.' Participant 2 continued that they aimed to give pupils a head start when they were old enough to secure construction employment:

*They learn how to drive the machines correctly. The dumper, the rights and the wrongs, this is how they should be driven up a hill. When digging trenches, how near can you go to the trench. So, we're instilling all the safety aspects of construction, so when they are 16, they've got qualifications and can go for interviews.*

Participant 4 delivered work-based accreditations and qualifications in 'plumbing, cookery, carpentry art and photography.' They explained that they 'embed maths and English into everything we do.' They re-engage pupils with learning through vocational education. They explained 'it does work.' Some of the young people they worked with could return to mainstream education, and others had progressed into apprenticeships. Participant 5 explained that their aim was for the learner to gain 'five to nine GCSE or equivalents' and that learners would progress into 'something that they're interested in and would maintain.'

## DISCUSSION

This research examined the construction AP delivered to children and young people who had struggled to cope in a mainstream setting and were at risk of disengaging from education, utilising Bernstein's sources of consensus and disaffection, which has been predominantly used to explore the culture of mainstream education settings. Research question one asked what type of construction AP was delivered. Reflecting on the literature on skills shortages, participants delivered training to address the industry's skills shortages (CITB, 2003, Brooks and McIlwaine, 2021). The literature on AP explains that there needs to be more research into the nature, implementation, and value of AP programmes (Thompson and Russell, 2009; Trotman *et al.*, 2018). The limited literature on school-based construction training suggests it can support socio-economically disadvantaged groups into the industry and give them valuable

work experience (Bruno *et al.*, 2016; Taylor, 2004). The literature also acknowledges that workforce diversification might be one way to meet the skills shortage in the industry (Infrastructure Australia, 2021). Participants from industry explained that they needed to give something back to communities; they recognised that the pupils they worked with lacked opportunities. However, they also explained that they were aiming to tackle skills shortages because there needed to be more tradespeople. Participants delivered a range of practical hands-on training, including plumbing, painting, and decorating, plastering, carpentry and brickwork.' Conversely, one of the participants explained that it was these more traditional routes that got promoted and had developed a programme of plant and groundworks training. Future research could explore whether construction AP is being planned with the skills needs of the industry in mind and where there is potential to address skills gaps.

Research question two was informed by Bernstein's expressive order to examine how construction training in a high-risk environment was delivered to pupils who had struggled with behaviour in mainstream education. The literature on AP explains that students in AP will have struggled with mainstream education and be at risk of disengagement from education whilst the construction literature explains that construction is a highly regulated and high-risk environment (Trotman *et al.*, 2018; Thomson and Russell, 2009; Loosemore and Bridgeman, 2017). Reflecting the literature participants explained that they did have concerns about behaviour from an H&S point of view. Participants acknowledged that whilst they had tight control measures in place, they felt what made a difference was that learners were doing something hands-on, they were not in the classroom, they were incredibly well-behaved and construction staff were impressed with their skills. This demonstrates that pupils were not anti-education and were open to learning in a more practical hands-on environment. There is scope to explore how this type of vocational learning can help re-engage pupils struggling with mainstream education.

In answering research question three, the instrumental order explored the knowledge, skills, or qualifications participants could offer pupils in AP. The previous literature has focused on academically able students considering trade and vocational routes instead of academic pathways (Callanan and Perri, 2020). The practical activities had been designed to complement the national curriculum. Participants were clear with pupils of the need for academic ability in construction and that it was not just about practical skills; they also needed the academic side, particularly maths. Bernstein (2003) explained that there could be tension in schools between the expressive and instrumental orders where pupils who are less involved in the instrumental order are less inclined to follow the expressive order of the school. The findings of this research suggest that pupils who had challenges following school rules (the expressive order) were able to follow the many regulations (such as Occupational H&S). This could be because, in construction training, H&S is part of the skills and knowledge gained (the instrumental order). As the construction trainer explained, what was specific to the construction sector, was the need to raise awareness and because 'your behaviours need to be this way', but it could also be because young people enjoyed the hands-on learning. Given the industry's focus on supporting disadvantaged people, future research could explore whether construction training could help young people educated in AP secure apprenticeship and employment opportunities, as this group is known to face barriers to employment (Trotman *et al.*, 2018).



## CONCLUSIONS

It is concluded that Bernstein's theoretical approach is helpful in exploring how construction AP is delivered to pupils at risk of disengaging from education. There is scant research on construction AP and limited research on all types of AP, unsurprisingly, as there is a messy landscape of provision and a lack of information on how it is used (Thomson and Russell, 2009; Malcolm, 2018). There is scope to explore how construction learning can re-engage young people with education. However, the findings of this research demonstrate that construction AP can have a role in constructing for the future and has a role in meeting the future skills needs of the industry whilst meeting requirements for training people from disadvantaged communities. Participants were mindful of the need to meet skills shortages and promoted both traditional routes, such as carpentry and plastering but were also able to tackle skills shortages in less promoted routes, such as plant and groundworks. This shows the potential for construction AP to meet future and perhaps the less traditionally promoted skills needed by the industry. Additionally, Bernstein's theoretical approach was helpful in exploring construction AP. Firstly, in the expressive order, participants described how pupils who had struggled with behaviour in a mainstream setting had been incredibly well-behaved when they were doing something hands-on and were impressed with their skills. Secondly, in the instrumental order, young people could develop skills and knowledge in construction AP. Participants described how activities had been designed to promote the national curriculum and were clear with pupils of the need for academic qualifications, particularly maths. The findings of this research suggest that construction AP can have a role in re-engaging some pupils in education and in meeting the skills needs of industry.

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