



By David Glossop, The Wheels Project

All too often the correlation between economic disadvantage and low achievement rings true. During the riots, the majority of youths who took part were from the most deprived areas where young people lack basic skills and training. Young people need skills and giving our disaffected youth access to a learning environment that provides this can have a significant impact on how they behave and improves educational outcomes. As managing director of The Wheels Project in Bristol, I have seen first-hand how this can be achieved.

Competitive motorsports - getting disaffected learners back on track



The Wheels Project is a scheme to get young people aged 13 to 25 interested in mechanics and participating in motor sports to help develop academic and social skills. Our students are predominantly from socially deprived areas in Bristol and the project provides these young people with work experience that will effectively reduce their chances of falling into the NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) category.

We're concentrating on low achieving kids that come to us through school or youth group referrals with a history of bad behaviour and truancy. As these pupils reach the end of the secondary school years and time is short, what can be done to address issues with their behaviour and attendance, raise their attainment at school and improve outcomes for the challenging youngsters?

We also take in young drivers that have already been involved in car accidents as a secondary aim is to improve road safety by providing a secure outlet for the desire to race.

Our students are enrolled into extra-curricular programmes at our motor vehicle workshops where they can

take part in one of many programmes, including mechanical repair, basic skills road safety, driving and the law and workshops on life skills and employment. The youth that attend have difficulties with basic skills in reading, writing, and arithmetic, which can be learnt through embedded activities in our workshops, rather than separate subjects as this seems to develop more interest.

Kids who have a history of bad behaviour at school can have a complete change of attitude when placed in a different environment, where their 'bad apple' label from school is effectively removed. In the practical workshop environment, we have seen even the most surly teens become more easygoing and fun loving when alongside some of our mechanics, who are very successful in gaining their respect. One pupil, for example, was rude, sullen and barely made eye contact with teachers at his school but our mechanics were able to relate to him and encourage him to interact by discussing topics relating to mechanical construction and maintenance.

One of our most successful programmes is being involved in the British School

Karting Championship (BSKC). The BSKC is an exhilarating nationwide motoring competition for schools and youth groups in Britain and provides us with an excellent opportunity for our kids to learn. We run a BSKC course, which involves learning about karting maintenance and driving - the young people even get the chance to actually construct a kart themselves.

The nine students who are enrolled on the course will have the opportunity to compete in the BSKC championship in teams of three. We ensure that entry into the championship is dependent on evidence of better behaviour, good attendance and an improvement in key skills. The chance to take part and several karting practice sessions is highly motivating and the majority of young people are able to improve on all counts. Building their own kart in preparation for the championships not only teaches them practical skills but they also talk about it, evaluate its performance and work out how to improve it. This improves their literacy and social skills. They are also creating something of their own and the kart becomes 'their baby' that they can look after. When driving the kart, they are

learning how to be responsible drivers while gaining an understanding of lap times and other mathematical concepts. Participating in the championship provides these kids with a real sense of achievement.

It gives them an opportunity to compete with other children who may be from more privileged backgrounds on an even playing field. Once in a kart, they are not being judged by their accents or socio-economic background, only their performance on the track.

In last year's regional finals, one of our students was close to achieving second place in the final race. Although he was beaten to the post, it gave him and his peers a real taste of how close they came to winning and taught the valuable lesson that effort and concentration can make a world of difference to outcomes.

The British School Karting Championship (BSKC) takes teams of three from all types of schools and colleges. You do not need your own kart or equipment to participate and full training is provided through a network of national karting tracks.

www.bskc.co.uk

