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Facilitating re-engagement in learning: A disengaged student perspective

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Abstract

Past research into student engagement has focused on behavioural engagement in students attending mainstream schools. The current research investigated the school-related factors that facilitate re-engagement in learning from the perspective of initially disengaged students. Adopting a student-centred perspective allowed us to capture affective and cognitive, as well as behavioural, engagement. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 students (aged 14–16 years) attending an alternative provision (AP) secondary school. These students were disengaged with learning on arrival at the school. Students answered questions about their engagement and academic progress at the AP school. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to identify, describe and interpret the themes within the data. In general, students believed that they had re-engaged with their education having joined the AP school. Themes representing factors that students believed facilitated this re-engagement were organised into four areas: classroom, relational, generic school and personal. Key facilitators of engagement were positive student-staff relationships and low student-staff ratios. Several new factors, idiosyncratic to disengaged students, emerged. As these factors are not represented in existing models of engagement, they can be used to form a model of re-engagement into education. Moreover, the current findings need to be disseminated to mainstream schools to enable them to incorporate elements into their teaching practices to prevent disengagement/encourage re-engagement.

Facilitating re-engagement in learning: A disengaged student perspective

It is widely accepted that student engagement is a multidimensional construct, consisting of affective (e.g., interest in and enjoyment of school, positive relationships with teachers and peers, and feelings of belonging to school), cognitive (e.g., deep thinking, investing effort into learning and a preference for challenge) and behavioural (e.g., high levels of attendance, class participation and positive behavioural conduct) elements (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004). Affective and cognitive engagement lead to successful behavioural engagement, which, in turn, leads to positive educational outcomes, such as high academic achievement (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Fortunately, student engagement is malleable and responsive to contextual factors, such as the student's school or family circumstances, and therefore current models assume that student engagement mediates the effects of contextual factors on educational outcomes (Fredricks *et al.*, 2004; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). School-related contextual factors were the focus of the present study.

Past research into student engagement has concentrated on behavioural engagement in students attending mainstream school. Conversely, there is less research on engagement in students who have disengaged from education. These students are at increased risk of a range of negative outcomes, including poor mental and physical health, and involvement in crime (Pirrie *et al.*, 2011), however, re-engaging these students is challenging as conventional routes are often inappropriate (Cook, 2005). Identifying the factors that facilitate re-engagement in this population is therefore crucial. Past research has found that low student-teacher ratio and positive student-teacher relationships are particularly important for re-engagement, as well as treating students with respect, non-punitive behaviour management, offering flexible routes to learning, teachers conveying a belief that academic success is possible and teaching material that is perceived to be relevant to the student (D'Angelo &

Zemanick, 2009; Frankham *et al.*, 2007; Jones, 2011; Schussler, 2009; Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

The current research investigated the school-related factors that initially disengaged students believed facilitated their re-engagement in learning. Adopting a student perspective allowed us to capture affective and cognitive, as well as behavioural, engagement (Reschly & Christenson, 2012).

Methodology

Participants were 35 students (23 male, 12 female, aged 14–16 years) attending an AP secondary school in the North West of England, a provision established for students who have stopped attending mainstream school. There are multiple and complex reasons why students leave mainstream education including exclusion, alcohol and substance abuse, violent behaviour, mental health issues and teenage pregnancy (Cook, 2005). Students were disengaged with learning on arrival at the AP school, in which they followed a reduced academic curriculum, class sizes were small (five students on average) and there was a focus on building student-staff relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students to elicit information about their affective, cognitive and behavioural engagement, and about their academic progress at the school. Interviews were audio-recorded, lasted between 5 and 36 minutes and were fully transcribed.

IPA was used to identify, describe and interpret the themes within the data. In keeping with the principles of IPA, the analysis was inductive, a priori concepts and themes were not imposed on the data, and each transcript was analysed separately to maintain its idiographic commitment (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014; Smith *et al.*, 2009). Therefore, themes emerged from each transcript and as a final step, patterns and connections between themes were identified (Smith *et al.*, 2009).

Findings

Students believed that they had re-engaged with their education having joined the AP school. Several themes emerged representing factors that students believed facilitated this re-engagement and were organised into four areas, reflecting classroom, relational, generic school and personal factors. In general, students compared their experiences at the AP school with those of their past which were mainly of mainstream school.

Classroom Factors

Students believed that small class size led to greater concentration in lessons due to staff being better able to monitor and control behavioural problems. They emphasised the importance of the low student-staff ratio (typically two-three members of staff to five-six students) in ensuring that help was readily available and in receiving sufficient one-to-one support, as demonstrated below,

‘...any time you need the teacher they are just right there.’ (Male student)

Staff (teachers and lesson support staff) were perceived to be more approachable, helpful and inclusive in lessons. Having autonomy was important to students; they explained that they were able to choose aspects of their learning and that this helped them to engage in the task, for instance, one student explained that she was able to choose the topic that she wrote about in her English lesson,

I like boxing, the boxing show I done mine on, based on that, cos I knew about it and I enjoyed about it, like, I enjoyed writing about it. I done dead good in the end. (Female student)

Many students felt that the level of intellectual challenge was appropriate and that they were more likely to work well if they found the topic interesting or enjoyable. They also reported that lessons were relaxed, sometimes fun and interactive, and that there was no requirement to work in silence or continuously without a break. Students believed that these factors facilitated their learning.

Students described how peer interactions in the classroom were positive, for example, they helped each other out with their work. Students responded well to the school’s approach

to discipline which was reportedly different to their experiences at mainstream school. Rather than being shouted at, disruptive students left the classroom with a member of staff to allow them to calm down and talk about the underlying problems that caused the disruptive behaviour,

In my old school they used to get right in your face and scream in front of everyone so I would scream at them back but the teachers up here they take you outside or take you on a walk to calm you down and then they talk to you. (Male student)

Relational Factors

The student-staff relationship was crucial; students believed that their strong and positive relationships with school staff had significantly facilitated their re-engagement with education. Students specified four key aspects of this relationship. They believed that staff (a) treated them with respect to which they reciprocated by showing respect back, (b) spent time getting to know students on a personal level, (c) cared for students, understood that problems at home often caused behavioural issues at school and made a genuine effort to help, and (d) encouraged and believed in students, which actively promoted students' self-belief that they could achieve. Students explained how the positive reactions of staff were in marked contrast to the behaviour of teachers in mainstream school, for example, one student reported,

'The staff in my old school they were staff and that's it but the teachers here the staff are like your friends.' (Female student)

Students felt a real sense of belonging to the school, as demonstrated below,

...when you're here everyone [staff and students] sticks together like, erm, it's like a big family really.
(Male student)

Students got along well together and they attributed this to their similarity in terms of how they ended up at the school (e.g., being excluded from their previous school). Positive peer and student-staff relationships, as well as the small size of the school, all fostered their sense of belonging.

Generic School Factors

Students explained that they had more freedom at the AP school, for instance, they were allowed to walk to the shop at break-times as opposed to having to stay on the school grounds. They enjoyed being able to choose the subject they studied on one day of the week and described how this motivated them during their other lessons,

‘...they give us that opportunity so that makes us work through the week. That’s our thing at the end of it... It’s just like a chill day really.’ (Male student)

The structure of the school day suited them, they were satisfied with the resources and facilities, and they enjoyed attending school excursions. Students also placed significant value on the opportunities they were given at the AP school, as illustrated in the following quotation,

...with the [AP] school you can do some brilliant things. The opportunities that they throw at you, you’ve gotta grab them, erm, good opportunities like this you wouldn’t get in a different school. (Male student)

In particular, students reported receiving considerable support from staff regarding their future employability.

Personal Factors

Students explained that their experiences at the AP school had helped them to realise the value of education, and they felt determined to engage in their learning and to achieve academically, as shown below,

I actually want to make the effort here. Because I screwed up in my last school, just because I didn’t get on with a few teachers, and just because I couldn’t be bothered, but I’m getting my head down now. (Female student)

Some students reported investing time outside of the school day on their learning. It was evident that the AP school had improved the psychological well-being of students; they told us that the school had helped them to mature, to feel more relaxed and less angry, and that their self-confidence had increased. Finally, students said that they applied more time and

cognitive effort into understanding their schoolwork, and that since starting at the school, their attendance, behaviour and academic achievement had all improved.

Conclusion and Implications

There was evidence of affective (e.g., students reported that they enjoyed school and had positive relationships with staff and peers), cognitive (e.g., they invested time and effort into learning) and behavioural (e.g., their school attendance and behavioural conduct had greatly improved since they joined the school) engagement in these initially disengaged students. Considering that these students were disconnected with education on entry to the AP school, often with extremely poor rates of attendance at their previous school(s), these are important findings and strongly suggest that the school-related contextual factors identified here have had a major part to play in their re-engagement with education.

The importance of positive student-staff relationships and low student-staff ratios in the re-engagement of disengaged students was confirmed. Moreover, several new factors, idiosyncratic to initially disengaged students emerged. These factors may reflect a process of re-engagement not currently represented in existing models, which have been based on research on engaged students (e.g., Reschly & Christenson, 2012), and thus could form the basis of a model of *re-engagement* into education. Current findings also need to be disseminated to mainstream schools so that they can incorporate elements into their teaching practices in order to prevent disengagement/ encourage re-engagement. The AP school successfully re-engaged these initially disconnected students back into education. Therefore, an increase in AP schools, which have the scope to focus on the factors identified here, would likely boost the number of students successfully completing their education.

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