

Student perceptions of teaching practices that can facilitate educational re-engagement

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Abstract (249 words)

Past research into student engagement has focused on behavioural engagement in students attending mainstream school. The present study investigated the school-related factors that facilitate re-engagement in learning from the perspective of disengaged students. Specifically, teacher (or other school staff) behaviours that supported the psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence were identified using the framework of self-determination theory (SDT; Deci *et al.*, 1991). The aim was to extend the literature on how to re-integrate disengaged students into education. Participants were secondary school students who had stopped attending mainstream school. They attended an alternative provision (AP) school in England, in which they were taught a reduced academic curriculum in small classes with a focus on student-staff relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students to elicit information about their psychological needs, engagement and academic progress. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to identify, describe and interpret the themes within the data. Students believed that they were engaged in their learning at the AP school, and the student-staff relationship was found to be crucial to this re-engagement. Students reported many different avenues through which staff supported their needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence. These specific teacher behaviours may reflect a process of re-engagement into education not currently represented in existing models of engagement and may be used to form the basis of 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.

Extended Summary (986 words)

Aim

Past research into student engagement has focused on behavioural engagement in students attending mainstream school. This large body of literature has identified a number of school-related factors that have been found to facilitate student engagement. 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). Re-engaging these students presents a significant challenge as conventional routes are often inappropriate (Cook, 2005). Identifying the factors that facilitate re-engagement in disengaged students is therefore crucial.

Self-determination theory (SDT) postulates that individuals have three fundamental psychological needs: the need for autonomy, relatedness and competence (Deci *et al.*, 1991). Broadly speaking, autonomy is the need to express one's authentic self and to experience

connectedness between one's actions and personal values, relatedness refers to the need to feel securely connected to others or to belong to a social group, and competence is the need to feel capable of producing desired outcomes and avoiding negative outcomes (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Furrer *et al.*, 2014). From an educational perspective, SDT suggests that students will be engaged in their learning when their learning environment satisfies the three needs, and the literature has supported this contention (e.g., Park *et al.*, 2012). Ryan and Deci (2009) emphasised the critical role that teachers play in creating a classroom climate that supports the needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence, and Pianta *et al.* (2012) argued that classroom settings should support these needs specifically via the student-teacher relationship, as this is the primary mechanism by which student engagement is fostered.

The present study investigated the school-related factors that facilitate re-engagement in learning from the perspective of disengaged students. Specifically, teacher (or other school staff) behaviours that supported the psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence were identified using the framework of SDT. The aim was to extend the literature on how to re-integrate disengaged students into education.

Methodology

Participants were 35 students (23 male, 12 female, aged 14-16 years) attending an alternative provision (AP) school in 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, anxiety 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 and there was a focus on student-staff relationships. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students to elicit information about their needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence, affective, cognitive and behavioural engagement, and academic progress at the school. Interviews were audio-recorded, lasted between 5 and 36 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to identify, describe and interpret the themes within the data.

Findings

Students believed that they were engaged in their learning at the AP school, and the student-staff relationship was found to be crucial to this re-engagement. There were many different avenues through which staff at the AP school supported the needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence.

Support for autonomy. Students believed that staff at the AP school treated them with respect, were non-confrontational when students were disruptive in lessons, gave them choices in lessons, taught material that was of personal relevance to students, made their lessons flexible to the needs of students and promoted the value of school and education.

Support for relatedness. Students explained that staff showed an interest in them and spent time getting to know them on a personal level. They felt that staff cared for them, were understanding, and tried their best to help them with their problems. Students also reported that staff encouraged positive peer relationships in the classroom.

Support for competence. Students said that teachers were clear when they were teaching and in their expectations for schoolwork and behaviour, set work at an optimal level of challenge and were available when students needed support with their work. Students also felt that staff believed in them and in their ability to achieve.

Students believed that they could learn and make progress in the context of these positive student-staff relationships. Specifically, they said they were more prepared to engage, try and persist, and to ask for help in the classroom, and less likely to get into trouble, compared to when they were at their previous school(s). Positive student-staff relationships also increased student's attendance, psychological well-being, enjoyment of school, and ultimately, academic achievement. The data suggests that students were affectively, cognitively and behaviourally engaged.

Theoretical and educational significance

The present study extends SDT to examine the re-engagement of disengaged students. The importance of the student-teacher (or staff) relationship and how it can support the needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence was confirmed by the findings, and supports the extant literature (e.g., Pianta *et al.*, 2012; Ryan and Deci, 2009). It is likely that the specific teacher behaviours that students reported were the most influential to their re-engagement into education and may reflect a process of re-engagement not currently represented in existing models, or in the framework of affective, cognitive and behavioural engagement, which were based on research on engaged students. The findings are theoretically significant as they can be used to form the basis of a model of *re-engagement* into education.

Current findings need to be disseminated to mainstream schools so that they can incorporate elements into their teaching practices. Strategies can be developed which would help to prevent disengagement/encourage re-engagement. This information could be included in initial teacher education and continuing professional development programs for teachers. It was apparent that the AP school was successfully re-engaging initially disengaged students back into education. An increase in the number of AP schools, which have the scope to focus on the teacher/staff behaviours identified here, would positively impact on the amount of students successfully completing their education.

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