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**Mediated disaffection and reconfigured subjectivities: The impact of a vocational learning environment on the re-engagement of 14–16-year-olds.**

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**Abstract:** In England, one in three 11–16-year-olds is said to illustrate poor behaviour (Sodha and Guglielmi, 2009), while students at key stage 4 (14-16) who are not engaged in education are often identified as, or at risk of becoming, disaffected (McKendrick *et al.*, 2007). This paper explores the impact of a vocational learning environment on disaffected 14–16-year-old girls' cognition. Through a series of semi-structured interviews, data are obtained in relation to the cognitive processes that motivate attitude to learning and engagement with a learning environment. Of particular relevance is the impact on: reflection, self-awareness, subjectivity and metacognitive functioning. Disaffected female students are seen to develop greater self-insight and objectivity as a result of their engagement in an alternative learning environment. It is thus argued that disaffection with learning may be reduced through a temporary removal from the problematic environment (school), although this can perpetuate poor perceptions of schooling.

**Introduction**

Students who are not actively engaged in compulsory education are often identified as disaffected (McKendrick *et al.*, 2007) and in recent years in the UK numbers are said to have risen (Steer, 2000; Newburn and Shiner, 2005; Jones, 2013). In particular, much debate has focused on 14–16-year-olds (Cowen and Burgess, 2009; Raffo, 2003) and an increase in female

disaffection (Jackson *et al.*, 2010). This age range is often seen as important in the English education system as it is the period of study that culminates in the nationally recognised general certificate of secondary education (GCSE) and was, until recently, the end of compulsory education (students can still enter employment at 16 but need to remain in some form of learning – e.g. employment with training – until 18. See Gov.UK, 2014). Thus, the need to perform and achieve in this area has been noted as demanding for many students and can result in increased anxiety (Putwain, 2008) and disaffection (Duncan, 2013).

Disaffection is often conceptualised ambiguously; indeed, it is described as ‘both opaque and elusive’ and is viewed as a complex area of understanding (Piper and Piper, 2000: 80). It is often identified through features such as disruptive behaviour and truancy (Piper and Piper, 2000) and a working definition for this paper incorporates non-participation in school and aligns closely to Sodha and Guglielmi’s (2009) use of the term *disengagement* – referring to a lack of cooperation from the young person. Thus, disaffection in this study relates specifically to learning and the school environment and refers to the point at which student dissatisfaction with education leads to active disengagement. Garvik *et al.*, (2014: 594) suggest that ‘school disengagement is about detaching from school, disconnecting from its norms and expectations’ and students in this study who exhibit such behaviour are identified by their school as *disaffected* and ‘at risk’. Terms surrounding engagement can be difficult to define as they are often context-specific and

Bryson and Hand's (2007) argument that engagement and disengagement are situated on a continuum is a useful one. However, this study steers away from students who may be 'quietly disaffected' (Feng and Johnson, 2009: 12) and concentrates on those who have undergone a programme of intervention.

Disaffection with learning is an international phenomenon (Harber, 2008) and has prompted debate in countries such as America (Kelly and Price, 2009), Australia (Thompson and Bell, 2011), India and China (Feng and Johnson, 2009), Lebanon (Gaith and Shaaban, 2005), and Lithuania (Petrušauskaitė, 2010). Indeed, OECD (2012: 11) reports 28 out of 65 countries scoring below the OECD average on 'having skipped classes or days of school.' Despite many common features, however, cultural experiences can vary widely. In Japan, for instance, a 'school phobia/refusal' [*tôkôkyohi*] is identified where 'students, on a long-term basis, cannot or do not go to school' (Yoneyama (2000: 77). Consequently, the Japanese school system is problematized and *tôkôkyohi* is said to result from a 'burnout of alienated and over-socialised students [that can even end in] suicide (or murder)' (Yoneyama, 2000: 92).

The British government has invested millions of pounds on initiatives designed to address school disengagement, such as provision for excluded children to get them 'back on track' (DCSF, 2008), increased flexibility in the 14-16 curriculum (Golden *et al.*, 2004), work-related learning (Ofsted, 2005), physical activity programmes (Sandford *et al.*, 2008), multi-agency approaches (Webb and Vulliamy, 2004) and a general focus on absenteeism

(Duncan, 2013). Unfortunately, many are not economically sustainable and ‘innovation becomes accepted and institutionalised at a very slow pace’ (Webb and Vulliamy, 2004: x), despite the potential to address disaffection. This paper, then, explores young girls’ perspectives of vocational learning in an out-of-school environment in the north of England.

I begin by foregrounding the student experience with an exploration of the cultural and socioeconomic factors that can impact on attitudes to learning and pupil motivation. I then identify the context of the research by outlining the operationalisation of the alternative learning programme and its aim of tackling disengagement. Thereon, data are used to represent the girls’ perceptions of the vocational environment and to illustrate their journey through engagement/disengagement/re-engagement. Through the promotion of student voice, common perceptual traits illustrate stages of growing self-awareness and metacognition. In line with other research (Billett, 2006; Davies *et al.*, 2008), it is also argued that girls’ subjectivities are influenced by their social experiences and cultural surroundings.

### **Newtown**

The local authority (LA) in Newtown advocates its work-based learning programme (WBLP) to address disaffected 14–16-year-olds. The programme utilises the professional knowledge of 26 private training providers, each offering pastoral care, re-engagement, and vocational learning to disaffected

young people. This study was conducted in a particular training provider that is popular with disaffected girls and specialises in hair and beauty courses.

Newtown is identified as a deprived area with GCSE attainment below the national average. In the year 2000, it was identified by Ofsted, along with several other areas, as in need of redress. Initiatives around this time promoted post-14 entry to further education to improve links with schools (DfES, 2002). However, schools in Newtown found that this was problematic, with poor attainment in literacy and numeracy often precluding attendance. Moreover, a rise in permanently excluded pupils caused further concern; thus, the WBLP was formed in 2002. To date, the programme is rated favourably by schools and the LA, where it is reputed to be an important alternative learning route for disaffected students.

### **Social influences**

Despite much negative media attention and labels such as ‘ignorant jobs’, many disaffected students value education (Graham *et al.*, 2015). However, young people often face a myriad of social pressures and these can induce disaffection, wherein the government policy discourse is about ‘diverting the unwanted behaviour and not, for the most part, about meeting unmet needs’ (Parsons, 2005: 188). Consequently, a challenge to conformity may result in educational losses.

For Duncan (2013: 31), schools often present an environment where ‘children are made to compete against each other, creating a pool of

disaffected resentful losers.’ However, a change of environment can benefit the many students ‘who would otherwise struggle in the social comparative and competitive environment of traditional academic classrooms’ (Kelly and Price, 2009: 819) or indeed those who simply refuse to conform (Mills and McGregor, 2010). As such, ‘alternative learning environments [can] alter students’ views about themselves...as learners’ (Riley *et al.*, 2006: 18) and help them to re-connect with a learning space (Smyth and McInerney, 2013), particularly where marginalisation is an outcome of schools’ adherence to homeostatic maintenance (Lumby, 2012). Thus, compulsory schooling can provide a competitive culture that coexists with conformity where students are expected to engage with a wide variety of subjects, often with a ‘narrowed academic focus’ (Hilton, 2006: 310). This in itself can impact on a student’s self-esteem and perceived ability and it is not uncommon for schools to inadvertently create factions of rivalry, some of which may coincide with societal groupings (Harber, 2008).

A priority for many young people is to be successfully situated within society and this can dictate their status or position in school. In this way, schools that fail to identify with students’ social surroundings may be perceived as alienating and thus lead to learning being relegated. Disaffection, then, is often a sociological concern (Slee, 2014) and this can lead to disengagement, whereupon school may be deemed irrelevant and students withdraw with a poor sense of belonging (Duncan, 2013). As such, many school environments prove problematic for some students and often result in a

riposte of activity, such as non-conformity and ‘unwanted’ behaviour, wherein lessons are planned ‘around ‘control’ rather than ‘learning’ factors’ (Haydn, 2008: 1). In order to circumnavigate the exclusion process, students may be allocated to an alternative learning environment, such as a vocational learning programme. One significant aspect of such environments may be that they provide a space for students to engage in social practices (Virtanen *et al.*, 2014). However, although this can present the opportunity for a new start (Kelly and Price, 2009), it can also create a disjuncture where the students are not ‘fully included in the mainstream curriculum’ (Jones *et al.*, 2003: 77) and may therefore be further marginalised.

Sodha and Guglielmi (2009: 8) suggest that one in twenty students in England miss a significant amount of their schooling through truancy, whilst one in three 11–16-year-olds illustrate poor behaviour. From such conceptualisation we may infer deep-rooted difficulties with the English education system, wherein many young people refuse to participate (Parsons, 2005). As Duncan (2013: 30) argues, ‘the schooling system in England, and also across the industrialized world, has a set of institutional features that actively produces disaffection amongst those unsuited to comply with them.’ Thus without intervention, one in three students being temporarily disengaged can result in embedded disaffection (Riley *et al.*, 2006).

### **Identifying disaffection and gender implications**

Disaffection has been noted in children’s early education (5-11) and although this is often described as ‘mild’ it can become exacerbated as the child

develops (Sodha and Guglielmi, 2009), particularly if preventative action is not implemented until 14+ years. Thus, the figure for learners identified as disaffected at this later stage in their education can be around 50 per cent (Newburn and Shiner, 2005). Moreover, identifying it may be problematic as causes are often manifold and issues such as low self-esteem may cause a misdiagnosis; disruptive behaviour, for instance, can be a mechanism for defending self-perceived inability where learning is 'dominated by the voices of the more powerful' (Smyth and McInerney, 2013: 44). Thus, students can become disaffected through feelings of incompetency (Boaler *et al.*, 2000) and self-labelling as educational failures (Yannick *et al.*, 2011). However, self-worth can be developed and those students who have never witnessed the impact of positive behaviour can be incentivised through praise (Haimovitz and Corpus, 2011). This can be particularly beneficial where students have experienced repeated negative emotions and where relationships with teachers are deemed to be ill-fitting (Smyth and McInerney, 2013).

Studies of disaffection have identified patterns of gendered behaviour, such as emotional and cognitive withdrawal, truanting, and higher levels of depression in girls, and comparatively lower aspirations in boys who disengage at a young age (Garvik *et al.*, 2014; Sodha and Guglielmi, 2009). Osler (2006) for instance, suggests that boys have a tendency to be more physical while girls are often seen to use psychological tactics such as bullying. However, many young women seek to negotiate inequality and thus challenge these norms, resulting in labels of laddishness from the media



(Jackson, 2006), whereupon disaffection may be exacerbated (Jackson *et al.*, 2010). The synthesis of disaffection, gender and vocational learning, then, is arguably a timely research focus, and analysis of young girls' perspectives can contribute to current understanding.

### **Constructing perspectives: environment and intrapersonal development**

The significance of learners' perceptions of their environments has led to a growing literature over the last thirty years (Entwistle and Tait, 1990; Trigwell and Ashwin, 2006; Könings *et al.*, 2011). Harris *et al.*, (2001: 263) noted a connection between a student's learning experience and their personal knowledge of the world where, 'Learning on-the-job was perceived to be more real life' whilst learning 'off-the-job' was more concerned with 'why.' Thus, a learning environment can create disinterest in learning where it is seen to influence students' behaviour. Moreover, Könings *et al.*, (2011: 441) claim that 'students' perceptions of instruction determine the nature and quality of their learning processes.' A change of environment, then, can help to re-motivate disaffected students and stimulate learning as it presents an opportunity for a new start (Kelly and Price, 2009; Mills and McGregor, 2010), particularly where students perceive it to be more constructivist and can engage in a deeper level of learning (Gijbels *et al.*, 2006). However, Gijbels *et al.*, (2006: 214) argue that, 'all learning environments are [potentially] constructivist since...students are constructing knowledge.'

### **Metacognition**

A different environment may mean a change in pedagogical practice and this can influence deeper metacognition (Thomas, 2013), a process that has been identified as influential in ‘learning and problem-solving’ and has been associated with the ‘achievement of deeper understanding’ (Sandi-Urena *et al.*, 2011: 324). Metacognition has been found to directly impact on learning as it can act independently of aptitude (Swanson, 1990). In this study, the term metacognition is used to refer to analysis of cognitive functioning or growing self-awareness. In a broad sense, there is an element of what is commonly referred to as ‘thinking about thinking’ (Papaleontiou-Louca, 2003); however, usage is closely related to students’ meta-analyses of their learning and reflection of personal progress, whereupon the outcome is arguably a deeper understanding of their learning journey and greater metaknowledge – sometimes identified in a raw state as ‘knowledge about knowledge’ (McKay, 2002).

Papaleontiou-Louca (2003: 10) describes metacognition as referring to ‘thoughts about thoughts, knowledge about knowledge or reflections about actions.’ There is, then, the element of self-thought in relation to how learning occurs; however, more importantly for the students in this research is the growing self-awareness of how role and self are contextualised within education. According to Joseph (2010: 100), ‘Successful students at all grade levels are self-regulated learners who assess their knowledge and examine their cognitive processes.’ Moreover, students that illustrate frustration with

school have been shown to ‘favor a mindless, nonmetacognitive intellectual behavior, that in turn worsens performances’ (Masi *et al.*, 1998: 136). The role of metacognition in raising self-awareness, then, may help students to increase their achievements and this is important for this study as fears of academic incompetence are linked to disengagement (Yannick *et al.*, 2011). However, school frustration can be an inhibiting factor for metacognition and one strength of alternative environments is the opportunity for a ‘clean slate’ (Kelly and Price, 2009).

An alternative environment can facilitate the process of metacognition and greater self-perception (Riley *et al.*, 2006), often because it offers a critical space for thinking (Smyth and McInerney, 2013) that is not always perceived to be available in school, perhaps due to the pressure to perform (Duncan, 2013). Moreover, strong teacher-student relationships are often seen to be tailored to individual needs and flexibility in an alternative setting can often lend itself to such relationships.

## **Methodology**

Through a social constructionist approach (Burr, 1995), this paper explores qualitative data obtained from semi-structured interviews with ten female 14–16-year-old students, three tutors and three teachers. The young women are seen to *construct* meaning by drawing on, and reconfiguring, prior knowledge to make sense of new experiences.

Qualitative research has been noted as ‘a key commitment’ of capturing students’ perceptions (Gibbs, 2007: 7), within which interviews can ‘reach areas of reality that would otherwise remain inaccessible such as people’s subjective experiences and attitudes’ (Peräkylä and Ruusuvuori, 2013: 277). Furthermore, a qualitative study has been argued as central to the understanding of disaffection as it can capture emotion (Lewis, 2013). The young women who participated in this study were undertaking vocational learning in an out-of-school environment in the north of England and were each interviewed for an average of one hour (in total). All ten were working towards a level one qualification entitled *Introduction to the Hair and Beauty Sector*. The interviews were *extended* over six-weeks to enable the capture of bite-sized chunks of data to align with the young women’s general disinterest and to build on their interaction with the environment, in a semi-structured fashion. While this method has the potential to contribute to the data by facilitating thinking, the themes that emerged were arguably strong from the outset. Thus, the young women’s perceptions of learning, and engagement in metacognition and reflection, can be seen to be attributed to their experiences, rather than the data collection process.

The participants are identified as working class (based on parental occupation and income) and of White British ethnicity, and the research sample draws on a mixture of schools in Newtown. The young women are all studying in a single training provider within the WBLP and were chosen at random to illustrate the impact of a specific vocational route on disaffection.

All ten were identified as disaffected by their school, had missed a great deal of their compulsory education, and were considered to be at risk of exclusion. Historically, schools hold the WBLP in high esteem for re-engagement, based on previous increased attendance, qualification attainment in training providers (see Allan, 2014b) and comparison with school predictions for student progress. Increased attendance in a provider is often 'rewarded' with more allocated days and the young women in this study were attending five days per week at the time of the interviews.

The interviews were analysed using an interpretivist paradigm, based on Radnor's (2002) framework, wherein transcripts of the interviews are subjected to a categorical analysis. Topics are identified, ordered, and then collated into themes. Several themes were initially identified whereupon they were reformatted into three meta-themes: i) metacognition ii) the student voice iii) the pupil perception of a 'casualty' status. This paper focuses on the participants' developed metacognition. The data from the interviews with the young women are also supported in a small way by findings from interviews with teachers and tutors and casual observations of the students during several learning activities. Teacher and tutor interviews each lasted around 20 minutes and provided contextual data for the programme, information in relation to the environment, and served to highlight the concerns of the borough from a teaching perspective. However, the primary focus of the research lay in capturing the young women's perspectives; therefore, the findings for this

paper concentrate mostly on these. Original data is used but all participants' names are pseudonyms.

The term *extended* is used to refer to the process whereby each young woman is seen to be interviewed once, albeit in several 10- to 20-minute sittings. The interviews were extended to avoid exacerbating the young women's disaffection and to sustain their engagement with the questions. Furthermore, the extensions facilitated an exploratory process, wherein seemingly key areas became a focus for the ensuing segments of the interview. Hence, the research adopted a deductive manner for the investigation but embraced a partial-inductive analysis where initial findings were amended in response to new data.

Using the interpretive paradigm, I have identified themes that relate to the students' perceptions of the WBL provider and of the school environment yet this offers potential limitations; therefore, the data collection process was continued until saturation, i.e., themes reoccurred frequently. The data are used to illustrate the young women's perceptions of their learning journey.

## **Findings**

A key disaffection-reducing aspect of the WBL provider is that the environmental practices are perceived to be at variance with school, in that they mimic the young women's milieux, and thus complement their cultural understandings. As such, learning is reconceptualised and the girls feel compelled to reflect on their situation:

*Jade: Being here has made me think about my future...In school, you're just expected to do what they say; they don't think about what we want.*

*Interviewer: So what did you want? What were your dreams?*

*Jade: I don't know. I knew I liked hairdressing but I thought that was just something you did when you were older. I don't think I thought about it, to be honest. When I came here it made me think more.*

*Abbey: Mr Brennan [school teacher] said to me, 'you need to get your act together' and I just laughed. But when I came here that's exactly what I thought. I know he was an idiot but I think he was probably right.*

Such thinking can be seen as relating to the provider, rather than the interview process, as the above comments (and many more) were recorded in the first week of data collection. From the outset, the girls identified school as an environment where conformity was important and individual learning needs were often ignored.

However, the girls illustrate that their current educational situation is partially resultant from their behaviour and previous views on learning, and only partly from the school system's inability to relate to their needs. Thus, similarities are drawn in the young women's overall learning journey: they are

all seen to move through the process of engagement, disengagement, and then re-engagement:

*Abbey: I didn't mind school when I was younger but once I got into year 8 it started to go downhill...Because my brother was naughty in school, they took it for granted that I would be naughty... I'd kick off and get sent out... I love it here [provider], I'd come here every day if they'd let me. Well, not actually every day but you know what I mean.*

*Interviewer: So, with regards to school, why did you stay off so much?*

*Geri: Because... the teachers used to do my head in. They give you stuff and you think, what's the point?*

*Interviewer: So do you get support here?*

*Geri: Yeah, loads. I think that's why my attendance is good. I think I've only been off twice since we came back from the Christmas holidays. And one of them was a hospital appointment.*

As they embrace their new surroundings, barriers to learning reduce and this facilitates a more objective view of their educational situation and promotes deeper self-analysis. Consequently, although the girls attribute some blame to the school, they also accept responsibility for their actions, resulting in amended perspectives. In support of this, the tutors claim that the young



women mature during their time in the provider and demonstrate increased cooperation, reduced resistance to learning and, subsequently, stronger engagement with the learning activities.

The following key elements of re-engagement, based on data collected from the girls, can also be seen to be supported by the tutors' claims:

- An informal tutor-student relationship.
- Tutors who understand the young women's individual needs.
- The opportunity to be heard, and thus empowered (student voice).
- A focus on engagement first and qualifications second.
- A flexible working arrangement (less pressurised).
- Qualifications related to perceived relevant employment (albeit, choices may adhere to perceived social limitations and cultural pressures).
- A connection to the community and the students' milieu.
- An opportunity to move away from a problematic environment.
- Time to reflect and mature.
- A second chance for learning.

Interestingly, while this list draws on several features that have already been identified in much literature on disengagement, the overarching theme (and in particular point seven, *connecting to the students' milieu*) does strengthen the argument for reconceptualising disaffection as a reasonable riposte to a social situation (Slee, 2014).

The young women report that many of these aspects are unavailable in school; however, a mismatch of perceptions can be seen as teachers claim that such opportunities are often unacknowledged or rejected. In many of the schools, strategies were devised to tackle disengagement – such as bringing in parents, creating a separate learning space, and accommodating one-to-one tuition – with little success as the students perceived no relevance. The young women attribute blame to the school for failing to relate to their needs yet present an overriding barrier to the school environment. Amy, for instance, suggested that her teachers should have *forced* her to work at school, even though she self-acknowledges a previously obstructive attitude. There is, then, evidence of a deeper resentment of the school environment wherein the young women's removal results in a reconceptualization of learning. Thus, their rejection of school and acceptance of the alternative learning environment creates perceptual variance, i.e., features of school that may successfully address disaffection may be rejected by the girls due to their poor connection with the environment, an environment that is perceived to be ill-matched to personal and social needs.

The last point in the list – *a second chance for learning* – acknowledges the belief that the WBL provider offers an opportunity for those who struggle to engage with school. However, although this opportunity offers some respite, and the young women are seen to reconfigure their perceptions of learning and thus re-engage, some illustrate negative reinforcement as school is further problematized (Hall and Raffo, 2004).

### **Transformative practice, developed metacognition**

The young women's learning journey denotes growing self-awareness and intrapersonal transformation, such as increased metacognition and developed metaknowledge – i.e., some claim to know more about how they learn and what works for them, and thus place a higher value on knowledge itself and identify gaps in their own knowledge (see Geri below). This cognitive process is evidenced by the young women's reconfigured perceptions and improved attitudes to learning. They perceive WBL provider support to be readily accessible and relevant to their needs, and this helps to raise self-esteem and motivation. Subsequently, the young women exercise agency in their learning and either choose to continue with this particular learning route, or to reconceptualise school:

*Interviewer: So, thinking with your 'mature' head on... If you went back to school now...*

*Geri: I'd get me head down. I'm sorry I'm not in school (Geri).*

In a similar manner, Abbey also acknowledges her experience in the provider as serving to reconfigure her perception of school and allow her time to develop cognitively. As a self-confessed former fighter, she states, 'When I go in [school], a few girls start [for a fight] but I just walk away. There's no point.' Emily, too, was keen to promote her new environment as an important and fresh opportunity for learning. Through her own words we can see how she perceives the WBL provider to be more supportive than her school:

*Emily: I didn't really get that much help when I needed it so I'd just flip and walk out the class if no-one come to me straight away.*

*Interviewer: But here you get the support?*

*Emily: Yeah. If I can't do something I'll read over it again... but they'll help you (Emily).*

However, Emily exercises a lot more patience in the WBL provider and it appears that her perception of support plays a key role in her disaffection:

*Interviewer: What happens if you need help and there's nobody to help you, say, the tutors are busy?*

*Emily: Erm...I just wait. They come to you when they're ready.*

*Interviewer: Do they make you wait?*

*Emily: No. They're all right. If they can't come over it's usually because they're dealing with another student.*

Through reflection, Emily now controls her frustration and has a strong relationship with the tutors. She will often engage in re-reading and is willing to revisit incomplete tasks for her portfolio, behaviour that her former teachers reputed to be uncharacteristic.

Emily states that as a result of her experiences at school, she has maintained a negative impression of learning for many years. Now, however, she has reconceptualised learning as an important attribute of personal development, although *school* retains connotations of irrelevance. This suggests, then, that

such reconfigured thinking may have resulted from her increased reflection and deeper metacognition. Thus, she claims that her former behaviour and anger was a reaction to school but not to learning. Moreover, support is perceived in the provider as being relevant and available. When asked why she doesn't become stressed in the same way that she did at school, she responded with, 'Well, I do really but I get more help here.'

For Jade, reflections on her situation also resulted in dissonance between her perception of learning and that of compulsory schooling, wherein learning needed to be meaningful: 'The stuff that we do here [WBL provider] is good and it'll probably help us to get a job when we leave.' She identifies a tenuous connection between school and her needs, yet a perception of the WBL provider as a route to *real* work: 'With school, it's just giving me an education, it's not giving me an idea of what the world's like when you go out to it. But here [provider] you get more of an idea.' It appears that Jade's experience in the WBL provider facilitated deeper metacognition, whereupon she adopted a more objective self-perception. As she explains, 'I think coming here has made me grow up a lot. I feel, myself, mature. Being here, I can concentrate on my work but in school I didn't have that.' Overall, the young women perceive the school environment to be ill-suited to their particular needs and have thus utilised the change in environment as an opportunity for reflection.

Although there is an element of initial negative reinforcement of school perception, the girls' developed self-awareness and greater metaknowledge

results in a mitigation of school blame as they acknowledge their role in their disaffection. Thus, deeper self-knowledge and a more objective self-perception is seen to lead to greater attitudinal change.

## **Discussion**

The sociocultural influence of the school environment is seen to impinge on engagement as it is perceived as presenting a gulf between expected behaviour and the students' normative practices. School is identified as structurally inflexible, and the young women report poor teacher-student relationships and a stifling of agency due to a muting of student voice. Consequently, the young women create distance between their expectations and school practice, leading to a problematizing of the school system (Yoneyama, 2000) and reinforced acceptance of the WBL provider (Hall and Raffo, 2004). However, the young women perceive a greater level of objectivity; they claim to have matured, and to have developed deeper metacognition through engaging with self-analysis, thus resulting in the creation of 'alternative identities' (Burr, 1995: 93). Ultimately, through exploring seemingly relevant subject interests, and identifying realistic career goals, the girls revise their attitudes to learning.

For the schools in this study, then, it appears that the lack of engagement arises in part from the teaching process (deemed to be incongruent with the girls' expectations) and the students' impressions of learning at school (Parsons, 2005). Furthermore, many teachers also identified the school environment as being inconducive to learning for these particular individuals.

Thus, school is perceived as a contributory factor of marginalisation, where participation is merely peripheral, while the WBL provider is seen to generate community cohesion. However, on balance it must be noted that alternative educational programmes can also contribute to marginalisation through steering students away from mainstream curriculum (Jones *et al.*, 2003).

Alternative curricula, then, is by no means a panacea for disaffection and is in itself fraught with many concerns. For instance, the potential to further marginalise students is strong in at least two ways. One, a student's removal from school can result in negative reinforcement of poor connotations of school, particularly where the alternative programme is undertaken for five days per week and school links may be lost (Hall and Raffo, 2004; Allan, 2014a). Two, many vocational programmes do not cater for literacy and numeracy in the same capacity as schools and this can result in later disaffection, where progression routes, such as into further education or employment, are problematic (Smyth and McInerney, 2013). Both these areas are also of particular concern for this programme. While literacy and numeracy are taught in the provider – mostly in the form of functional skills – these do not represent the provider's strengths; therefore, links with schools are highly recommended, such as the continuance of at least one day per week to undertake specific tuition in these subjects. Moreover, factors such as teacher-student relationships and students' perceptions of agency and structural limitations within each environment should also be considered.

A perception of standardised school procedures has led to criticism in some studies, such as claims that schools are institutions that perpetuate disaffection and are often responsible for criminalising students (Raible and Irizarry, 2010); thus, comparisons with prison have previously been drawn (Harber, 2008). Indeed, many older school architectures exhibit narrow corridors and cell-like rooms that may increase feelings of claustrophobia, particularly when combined with ‘overcrowded classrooms’ (Kim *et al.*, 2010: 1). Due to an identified lack of opportunity for student voice (and therefore seemingly inhibited decision-making powers), and poor links between learning and sociocultural experiences, the girls in Newtown claim that the school environment is not suitable for all. Much of their reputed disruptive behaviour and non-engagement in school can be interpreted as a riposte against a system perceived as irrelevant and having failed to relate to individual, and subsequently societal, needs. Thus, school is problematized, whereupon the girls can only reconceptualise learning when they have moved away from this environment. The girls reject school for its apparent unsuitability and embrace the WBL provider, construing it as an opportunity for a fresh start (Kelly and Price, 2009). Hence, the WBL provider is perceived as functioning with flexible implementation and the girls demonstrate benefit from the negotiable learning practices. However, perception is a key factor of this interpretation as each environment illustrates clear and strong boundaries, even though the rules of the WBL provider are accepted unquestioningly while the parameters of school are endowed with prison-like connotations.



Consequently, the girls perceive the WBL provider as functioning with an effective balance between conformity and allowance of individual agency, and thus become autonomous and able to metacognitively process the implications of their learning journey.

### **Implications**

The data suggest that perceptual variance is a significant factor of engagement/disengagement for these girls as they self-situate according to how well they can relate to the environment. The provider is seen to encourage autonomy and liberated decision-making, and to increase their ability to think objectively, which results in a reconfigured self-perception. The opportunity, then, to experience each environment has enabled the students to metacognitively reflect upon their situation and the manner in which they learn, as well to conduct a more profound self-assessment (Riley *et al.*, 2006). The impact of this can then be seen as the girls learn to adapt to their surroundings in order to facilitate their needs and thus transfer their peripheral participation to full membership of the community (Lave and Wenger, 2009).

There are several elements of dissociation experienced by the girls, arising from a perceptual gulf between social experience and school practice, and the WBL provider clearly acts as an interface between the two. Hence, the girls disengage from school and embrace alternative learning, whereupon the WBL provider is perceived as a reconfiguration of the crucial segments of the school model. In this way, a challenge to environmental homeostasis helps to reduce

disaffection (Lumby, 2012) and learning is reconceptualised. The outcome for these girls, then, is developed, and more efficient, metacognition and stronger metaknowledge, resulting in greater learner autonomy and deeper engagement. Consequently, attitudes to learning improve, although attitudes to school either remain the same or are negatively reinforced (Hall and Raffo, 2004).

### **Perceptual variables**

The data suggest that the key mechanism of the WBL provider was its ability to provide the individual student with a more suitable learning programme in an alternative setting (Gijbels *et al.*, 2006). Primarily, the girls in Newtown reported previously poor connections with teachers in an environment that failed to relate to their needs and a WBL provider in which they could exercise their agency. As a result, thinking became liberated and the opportunity to indulge in metacognition was embraced. The girls evidence a more objective view of their situation and illustrate learning autonomy (Schraw *et al.*, 2006). Thus, the school environment is problematized by these girls (Gijbels *et al.*, 2006) and data in this research suggests that it is hinders metacognition through its structural insistence on conformity. In many ways, then, disaffection is a consequence of this restriction while disengagement is an act of reacquiring agency (Allan 2014a).

Although schools may benefit from the favoured informality, there is also much to be gleaned from a stronger understanding of perception, particularly in the construction of attitude. The data show that the girls previously resisted

school-related authority and disregarded flexibility, whereby they remained on the periphery of the school structure. However, the provider was perceived to represent a relocation towards central participation (Hung and Chen, 2001). In general, then, the girls appear to reconceptualise learning in the provider, arguably due to a strong bond with tutors, a greater focus on their individual concerns, both personal and work-related (such as occasional, informal chats about family and the community, and one-to-one support sessions to discuss their portfolios and general progress), and the opportunity to reflect and indulge in metacognition and self-analysis.

### **Concluding thoughts**

Disaffection is perhaps not a condition that can be neatly summarised and a potential panacea is arguably an unrealistic aim. However, this research shows that it can be alleviated for some girls through an understanding of their perceived needs, through a removal from school in instances where it has been problematized, and through the facilitation of a learning environment that replicates – or complements – the girls’ milieux. For schools, an understanding of the complex nature of each girl’s disaffection may help to promote an environment where they can reflect and develop their self-knowledge.

In support of this, Duncan (2013: 30) calls for schooling to be reoriented ‘as a benevolent child-focused opportunity, rather than an ever-harsher competition that consigns many to failure.’ Consequently, the most

appropriate remedial strategy is often a removal from the problematized environment to allow for a fresh start (Kelly and Price, 2009). For long-term solutions, then, schools may benefit from utilising programmes such as the WBLP (even on a short-term basis) as an opportunity to encourage greater metacognition and reflection on learning. In this way, students may reconnect with education as they reconceptualise learning and thus begin to endow it with personal value. While the alternative context is arguably a key factor for cognitive development in this way, it is perhaps the perceptual variance that is more significant and perceptions of school may alter as a positive consequence of reconfigured perceptions of learning.

This study also concurs with the literature on re-engagement in other areas, such as the importance of strong teacher-student relationships (Atwood and Croll, 2006), and the positive impact of engaging in deeper metacognition (Thomas, 2013). However, identified in this study is the suggestion that perceptual variance is a key factor of engagement/disengagement and thus contributes to our understanding of disaffection. Moreover, the tenuous connection with school that the girls illustrate suggests that social influences can inadvertently be a contributory factor of school disaffection. The WBL provider in this study acts as an interface between learning and social interaction and as a result enables re-engagement. As the girls become distanced from school, and participate in alternative learning, they engage in deeper self-reflection, illustrate greater metacognition, and thus reconceptualise learning.

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