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ENGAGING DISADVANTAGED YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE COURSE OF THEIR LIVES: THE IMPORTANCE OF STAFF/STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

by Carmel M. Hobbs and Jennifer Power

Abstract

Students who drop out, or disengage, prior to completing secondary education are at an increased risk of a range of poor social and well-being outcomes, and in turn experience reduced opportunities over the course of their lives. Although there is a body of literature identifying strategies within educational settings to counter risk factors for young people dropping out, little is known about perceptions of students in receipt of these strategies. This paper reports on a study conducted within a high school in Melbourne, Australia. Most students attending the school are at high risk of dropping out due to socio-cultural, behavioral, or mental health issues. The school utilizes alternative education practices to provide a calm and therapeutic environment to re-engage students with education, while providing a curriculum that adheres to mainstream standards. This paper reports on findings from an online questionnaire conducted with 62 students attending the school. The findings suggest that the students disengaged from mainstream schools because of a lack of support from their teachers, bullying, or behavioral issues. Students described their reasons for re-engaging with this current school as being the culture and structure of the school as well as their relationships with staff. Based on these findings, it appears that positive staff/student relationships developed and maintained under the therapeutic approach may be an effective strategy for engaging young people in education.

1. Purpose

Listen to Carmel Hobbs, PhD candidate, The Bouverie Centre LaTrobe University, Australia, discuss the importance of a staff/student relationship.

In Victoria, Australia, one in five young people do not complete secondary school (Year 12 or its equivalent) (Victorian Auditor-General, 2012). Students who dropped out, or disengaged prior to completing secondary education were at an increased risk of poor physical and mental health and social problems, and in turn experienced reduced opportunities over the course of their lives (Borrell et al., 2011; Lamb & Markussen,

2011; McHugh, Horner, Colditz & Wallace, 2012). Unfortunately, young people who were already socially or economically disadvantaged were at a greater risk of disengaging from education (Lamb & Markussen, 2011; McHugh et al., 2012). Not completing school further compounded such disadvantage.

There is a broad body of literature focused on student 'engagement' with school, although definitions vary and the term *engagement* embodies a multitude of concepts, including involvement, investment, attention, interest, and effort (Klem & Connell, 2004; Roffey, 2012; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt & Oort, 2011; te Riele, 2006). A particularly useful definition of educational engagement was described as "the quality of a student's connection or investment with the endeavor of schooling and hence with the people, activities, goals, values and place that compose it" (Roorda et al., 2011, p. 495). This definition encompassed a student's sense that education was a valuable investment that was relevant to their current and future life. It also referred to a sense of connection with, and interest in, the specific activities conducted in school on a day-to-day level.

In contrast to definitions which focus on individual student attitudes, many authors highlighted the structural dimensions of student engagement and disengagement from education. Socio-economic disadvantage for example, was often cited as a barrier to engagement in an education system that generally required students to have both financial and social stability to participate effectively (Burns, Collin, Blanchard, De-Freitas & Lloyd, 2008). Australian research has shown that homelessness or low socio-economic status (SES) were major risk factors for student disengagement (Marjoribanks, 2003; Ross & Gray, 2005; Sullivan et al., 2009). Additionally, parental education level (such as lack of university education) and occupation type (e.g. employment in a classically blue collar occupation such as trades or factory work) increased the likelihood of students disengaging (Baron, 2008; Berthelsen & Walker, 2008; Smyth, 2006). A series of individual factors coincided with this, such as academic failure, illiteracy, lack of practical or emotional support for education in the home, drug and alcohol abuse, or family violence (Beck & McNally, 2011; Borrell et al., 2011; te Riele, 2011). Cultural factors also influenced disengagement. Indigenous students and those who do not have English as a first language (in English speaking countries) were also at risk (Beck & McNally, 2011; te Riele, 2011). International literature identified a similar set of structural and individual risk factors including poor housing, crime, family breakdown, and a family history of low academic achievement or lack of educational goals (Burns et al., 2008; McHugh et al., 2012; Tsai & Cheney, 2012; Watson, 2011). These risk factors contributed to an increased likelihood of young people disengaging from school prior to completing their final year of school.

There was a growing body of research identifying strategies within educational settings to counter the above-mentioned risk factors and support student engagement in education. Strategies that supported engagement included: small class sizes, opportunities for student involvement in decision making, a flexible school curriculum, a whole school culture embodying support across the school, a sense of community, and a positive atmosphere. School support of relationships were highlighted as important, including the promotion of student/teacher relationships that were respectful and non-

judgemental, the promotion of strong peer relationships within school, and the provision of quality school facilities and resources (Borrell et al., 2011; Burns et al., 2008; Kellock, 2012; te Riele, 2006).

The relationship between teachers and students was of central importance to a student's experience of school and thus his or her engagement in education in general (Roffey, 2012). Negative or conflict-ridden relationships between teachers and students may lead to students developing a sense of fear and mistrust of school, particularly where students have other risk factors that made it difficult for them to engage (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Conversely, a strong, positive relationship with a teacher or adult mentor dramatically changed a young person's perception of the school environment, producing a sense of the school as a safe space and opening a door for engagement in educational activities (Klem & Connell, 2004; Tsai & Cheney, 2012). For disadvantaged students in particular, supportive relationships with school staff were described as a 'bridge' into the educational system that would unlikely have been created by other means. Teacher/student relationships provided a crucial interpersonal, human connection that was key for many of these students to engage with a system that was difficult or uncomfortable for them (te Riele, 2006; McHugh et al., 2012; Smyth & McInerney, 2009).

This paper reports on some preliminary findings from a study of students who attended a high school which had adopted an alternative educational model that had a specific emphasis on building strong relationships between staff and students. All students who participated in the study had previously experienced disengagement from a mainstream school setting and had subsequently re-entered the education system within the context of this school. The paper focuses on students' reports of their reasons for disengaging with education and factors that assisted them to re-engage, with a particular focus on the role of their relationships with staff at the school in facilitating this process. The broader research project employed methods that included interviews with students, parents and staff, and participant observation within a qualitative paradigm. This paper, however, focused on one aspect of the study, an online questionnaire that all students attending the school were invited to complete. The questionnaire was undertaken at the beginning of the project to provide some background information about students to inform the qualitative component of the study.

2. Perspective(s) or theoretical framework

The school in this study can be described as a public high school located in an outer suburban area of Melbourne, Victoria. The school follows a model which emphasizes staff-student relationships (SSRs) as central to supporting and engaging students. In contrast to mainstream school models, there was a limited focus on behavior management as a means of discipline or as a conduit for change among students. Strongly influenced by Bowlby's (1982) theory of attachment, the school model is driven by an understanding that in order for students to make personal and academic

progress, their capacity to form secure attachments with staff members is key (Riley, 2010). Bowlby advocated the importance of children developing consistent, secure attachment with at least one adult to achieve optimal social and emotional development (Bowlby, 1982). With respect to education, Bowlby's theory can be applied with the development of a school model that emphasizes the importance of predictable classroom structures and expectations. This ensures interactions with staff are consistent, safe, and reliable to enable strong SSRs to develop (Howie, 2012).

In Australia, Bowlby's approach is translated into a school-based framework for working with young people known as "Calmer Classrooms" (Downey, 2007). The approach claims that "A strong attachment to their school can provide a child with stability in an otherwise unstable world: offering relationships, maintaining friendships, providing positive and enjoyable learning opportunities and ultimately building resilience and hope" (Downey, 2007, p. 28). The approach is consistent with existing research that demonstrates a strong teacher/student relationship can support students' school engagement, attendance, and achievement (Klem & Connell, 2004; Roorda et al., 2011). Supportive relationships have helped students to thrive socially, emotionally, and academically and act as a protective factor for adolescent health and well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). At the core of the 'Calmer Classrooms' model are relationship-based practices that focus on creating interpersonal connections and diffusing conflict.

Staff/Student relationships (SSRs) and disadvantaged students

The school in which this study was located is in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, in what is traditionally a working class area characterized by "low-income, low educational attainment, high unemployment and jobs in relatively unskilled occupations" (profile.id, 2012, para.2). The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that non-school completion rates in this location were high. For instance, data from 2006 indicated that over one third (35.2%) of students in the area had left school before finishing their fourth year of secondary school (Year 10). By comparison, the average rate for Melbourne at the same time was 27.9% (Kellock, 2012).

The impact of staff/student relationships (SSRs) appear to be more important for students of low socio-economic background and those with learning difficulties or behavioral problems (Roorda et al., 2011). Potentially this was explained by the already tenuous sense of engagement these students may have with school. They may be more easily alienated by negative SSRs than students who were better pre-disposed to cope in a school environment (Tsai & Cheney, 2012). Similarly, positive SSRs may be more personally and academically important for students who find school systems difficult to navigate (Lamb & Markussen, 2011; McHugh et al., 2012).

Supporting SSRs in a school setting

The social and emotional capacity of staff have played an important role in the types of relationships they are able to build with students (Jennings & Greenberg,

2009). Teacher/student relationships can be fostered by a number of teacher characteristics or emotion based traits, including empathy, warmth, understanding, effortful engagement, and caring (Cornelius-White, 2007; Liberante, 2012; McHugh et al., 2012). To mold strong SSRs, teachers themselves have generally required a high level of social and emotional competence, self-awareness, social awareness, and self-regulation, as well the capacity to engage authentically with students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Often teachers inherently hold these social and emotional competencies (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). However, this may not be the case, particularly as educational staff have been frequently exposed to highly pressured, emotive situations, such as managing difficult or aggressive students, within which they have found it difficult to regulate their own emotional responses. Alongside this, a teacher's social and emotional competence may be affected by a range of factors including access to co-teacher support, principal/district leadership, access to professional development opportunities, and the level of pressure and stress associated with their teaching load (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Policy advocates have argued that school models should incorporate support for students to be able to establish at least one long-term relationship with a school-based adult and that schools should have a deliberate focus on building the competencies of staff to enable them to better engage with students at an interpersonal level to develop strong SSRs (McHugh et al., 2012; Jennings and Greenberg, 2009; Saunders & Saunders, 2001).

Alternative educational settings

Non-mainstream schools are often well placed to provide an environment in which strong SSRs thrive. There are several reasons for this. Most alternative schools have small student numbers and small class sizes overall, which has enabled greater interaction between students and teachers and a more personalized relationship between students and teachers. Some studies have also suggested that alternative school models that allowed students a high level of decision making about their own learning and input into the running of the school facilitate exhibited more genuine and respectful relationships between staff and students (Watson, 2011). Many alternative schools also offered a creative and relaxed environment where there were opportunities for interaction between staff and students that was less structured and more social. (Watson, 2011). What has been shown to make a difference for students in many alternative school settings compared to mainstream schools was the school's capacity to impart a sense that an adult genuinely cared about the student and about his or her educational achievement (Cornelius-White, 2007; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Tsai & Cheney, 2012). This helped students feel more noticed by teaching staff and more included in the school (Saunders & Saunders, 2001). While models such as this may not be possible to achieve in all educational settings, they may still offer insight into strategies that may be transferable to all schools.

3. Methods

Established in 2007, the school of study was a public secondary school with an enrollment of 195 students in 2013. Students ranged in age from 11-20, and it was the only school in the area that offered an alternative to mainstream government or private education for young people aged under 15 (Kellock, 2012). The school provided a flexible teaching model that recognized many students had in the past or are currently experiencing homelessness, childhood trauma, drug and alcohol use, family violence, poverty, involvement with youth justice or state care, family violence abuse and neglect, teen pregnancy, parenthood, or mental illness. As such, many students who attended the school found it difficult to attend regular school hours. Rather, students were expected to attend three two-hour classes a week.

The school had a policy of no detention, suspension, or expulsion as deterrents to unwanted behavior. Upon enrollment, students committed to following three expectations: 1) To maintain a safe and respectful classroom environment for yourself and others; 2) To allow fellow students to work in the classroom free from disruptions; and 3) To participate in school work. An individualized learning approach included students formulating their own learning plan with staff which was then followed in the classroom. Students' workload and difficulty of tasks was set at a level that was achievable but extended them and was agreed upon between the teacher and student. Young families were supported, and there was a class specifically set up for young mothers. The school provided students with food and drinks in the kitchen to which they could help themselves at any time. Students were allowed to smoke (outside school grounds), there was no uniform, and the use of bad language, while discouraged, was not disciplined unless it was directed at someone with hurtful intentions.

The therapeutic approach utilized in the school's philosophy was applied in policy and practice at the school. Prior to enrolling at the school, all students attended a meeting with the school's intake worker. This was a process that took between two to three weeks and involved the intake worker building a relationship with the student, demonstrating at all times respect and unconditional positive regard for students. During the intake process, students were introduced to staff, a step that was intended to assist students to begin developing a relationship with staff.

Classes had 10-15 students enrolled, and each class was assigned one teacher, one wellbeing team member, and a teacher's aide to work with the students. The students stayed in the same class and kept the same teacher and well-being worker throughout their time at the school. It is important to recognize that although all students had a dedicated well-being worker and teacher, they tended to refer to all of the staff as teachers; as such, references to teachers made by students in the data are likely to also refer to the well-being staff (Principal, 2011). The literature reported earlier in the paper referred specifically to TSRs as this is the language more commonly used; however, given the focus on all staff in this school, from here on these relationships will be referred to as staff/student relationships (SSRs).

“Circle time” was a useful example of how building therapeutic relationships were coupled with curriculum delivery and explicit teaching in the school. Each class began and ended with “circle time” where students and staff sat in a circle outside of the formal teaching space. At the beginning of class teachers began their explicit teaching and used the time to model pro-social behaviors to be observed and absorbed by students. At the end of each class, the students and staff returned to “circle time,” where staff provided explicit feedback to students regarding their achievements in class and provided a space for students to reflect and highlight their own behaviors or achievements that they are proud of.

Procedures

Students attending the school were invited to participate in the online questionnaire during regular class time. The researcher visited every class at least twice and was given time at the start of class during “circle time” to talk to students about the research and provide the information needed to allow students to make an informed decision about their participation. Staff members were present and involved in asking questions of the researcher that they felt students might have been wondering but not confident to ask. Prior to visiting the classes, a letter describing the research was sent to the parents of all students. The questionnaire was open to all students currently enrolled at the school, and staff (primarily teachers) were provided with the link to the questionnaire to distribute to students who were absent on the days the researcher made the class visits. The questionnaire was completed by students over two terms in the second half of 2012.

The questionnaire contained 60 items and took students approximately 20-30 minutes to complete. The length of completion time depended on the time taken to answer open-ended questions and the number of questions to which they chose to respond. The questionnaire was developed in partnership with the school principal and contained open-ended and fixed questions that covered areas including students’ experiences with mainstream education and with their current school, their families’ involvement with the school and the students’ education, perceptions of their teachers, parental education levels, perceived outcomes, and their future goals and aspirations. The open-ended questions provided students an opportunity to describe and explain their responses, eliciting more in-depth data and allowing for a richer understanding of the students’ experiences to emerge.

This paper reported on students’ responses to the following items from the questionnaire: Why did you leave your last school? Why did you want to go to this school? What do you like about this school? And, what are the three main things you like about your teachers at this school? These were all open-ended questions to which students were given unlimited space to respond. Most students wrote sentences or short paragraphs in response. Responses were hand-coded using an inductive, open-coding technique (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The project was approved by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee and the Department of Education and Early Childhood (DEECD) Ethics Committee.

4. Results

Participants

Sixty-two students completed the questionnaire, representing 35% of students enrolled at the school at that time. Of all students (n=79) who were present in class at the time the researcher visited, 78% completed the questionnaire. The results presented therefore are considered to be a good representation of the students who are engaged with the school.

Table One shows the demographic characteristics of students who completed the questionnaire. The average age of students was 17. There were roughly equal numbers of male and female students (around 50% male and 50% female). The majority of students identified as Anglo-Australian background (n=23, 37%) while 8% of students (n=5) were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. (n=20, 32%, left this answer blank). Twenty students (32%) were living in single-parent households, 17 (27%) lived in two-parent households, and seven (11%) students were not living with either parent.

Reasons for disengagement from previous school

Sixty students (97%) answered the question “Why did you leave your last school?” The response options to this question were open ended. Overall, these responses revealed an overwhelming sense of students not feeling listened to by staff and feeling let down by a lack of support from teachers.

“Because the teachers didn’t help me, they ignored me” (Male, 19)

The responses indicated that students responded to a lack of support or a sense of not being “heard” by their teachers through negative behavior, which ultimately led to them being asked to leave the school or to become withdrawn and stop attending.

“I left my last school because the teachers didn’t teach you anything or help you with anything ... I just didn’t see the point going there anymore” (Male, 18)

While lack of support was the most commonly mentioned reason for leaving their last school, some students also mentioned bullying, being asked to leave/expelled, and behavioral issues. These were often mentioned in a context of feeling that they did not receive support from teachers when these experiences occurred.

“The teachers did not care about me and I used to get bullied and the school did nothing” (Female, 17)

“I was falling behind and was not receiving any help from my teachers to catch up again” (Male, 19)

Re-engagement of students in education

Students were asked “Why did you want to go to this school?” Fifty-eight students wrote open-ended responses to this question. The most common reasons cited regarding the appeal of the school model related to what they knew about the school structure and culture (including flexible class times, small class sizes, the school culture, the teachers), while others identified more personal reasons such as the school being the only one that would take them.

The staff were mentioned by eight (12%) of students as a reason for enrolling. A number of students recalled their first pre-enrollment meeting with the teachers and the way that they were treated by staff as a reason that they wanted to attend the school. Other students did not refer directly to this meeting, but spoke more generally about the teachers (although it is important to note that the students often did not differentiate between the well-being and teaching staff, referring to all staff as teachers). In particular, students placed importance on the way that the staff speak to them, that they make them feel welcome and supported, and that they are “easy going.”

“Because I hadn’t been to school for too long and the teachers were very welcoming when I came in with a friend one day and asked me if I was in school and they told me I could come to (school) and they would put me in quickly” (Female, 18)

“Because they don’t tell you what to do they ask you and the teachers are the best” (Male, 16)

What students like about the school

Fifty-eight students (94%) responded to the question “What do you like about this school?” The teachers/staff were the most commonly mentioned aspect of the school that students liked. Thirty-six students (58%) mentioned the teachers. Additionally, nine students (15%) said “Everything.” Students also mentioned the school culture, class sizes, class times/hours, resources such as food and excursions, other students and the individualized approach to learning.

“Everything. The teachers, the staff, the principal. Everything. Excursions - they pay for them for you. You make new friends every year. Good electives” (Female, 19)

The availability of support and the willingness of teachers to help students when they need it, regardless of learning disabilities or other issues, was mentioned the most often, by fourteen students (39%).

“I like that I can bring my baby boy to school with me. I like that they can accommodate that I have a child with me, and I like that they help every person with any learning difficulty” (Female, 15)

“The teachers are easy to get along with and it’s like a second home. It’s also relaxing to kick back and do our work, the teachers help us to do our work if we need help unlike some other schools they don’t listen to what we have to say and they don’t put the effort to help us” (Female, 15)

Reference to the staff member’s personal characteristics included words such as friendly, encouraging, understanding, nice, wonderful, and great. Students also mentioned the way that the staff and the school provided an environment that is warm, supportive, welcoming, and safe both physically and emotionally. They described the teachers being mates or like family, and that the school felt like a second home.

“They love to get to know you & don’t judge you about anything and try fix your bad way into being good & your good ways into being better” (Male, 16)

What students like about their teachers

Fifty-seven students (92%) provided responses to the question “What are the three main things you like about your teachers?” The overarching theme that emerged was the support and care provided to students based on their individual needs. This was in regard to both their educational and personal needs. Being supportive, caring, and helpful was mentioned the most often by students. Students also referred to the ways in which teachers work with them—providing help, giving them space, and giving them work that was suited to their abilities—and how they showed support and care in various ways, including getting to know each student personally and catering to their needs.

“They take the time to get to know you and your faults and work around them” (Male, 16)

“Compassionate - one teacher helped me get my learners permit. She was much kinder than an average teacher” (Female, 18)

Respectful interactions and feeling understood and listened to were also of particular importance to students. Comments that indicated this included *“They don’t yell,” “You never get put down when being late or making a mistake,” “They help explain the work so people understand it,”* and *“They don’t push you into anything that you don’t wanna do.”*

Equality in relationships emerged as a key theme in these responses. Many students acknowledged the sense of friendship and family that they felt at school. They valued the effort that staff made to get to know them, to have fun with them, and to show that they genuinely care for and respect them.

“They treat us like adults” (Male, 17)

“They have the time to listen to me and they are my friends not just my teachers” (Male, 16)

“That they’re my mates. They have time to listen to our problems and will never give up trying on us” (Male, 15)

5. Scholarly significance of the study

As expected, and consistent with the literature, the findings from this study demonstrated that staff-student relationships were important to students both in terms of their reasons for leaving their previous schools and in terms of supporting their academic and personal development at the school involved in the study. With respect to the reasons why students left their previous school, students’ responses indicated that they often felt misunderstood, as though they were disliked or didn’t fit in, or that no-one cared about them. A number of students recounted that they felt teachers did not care or respond when they were bullied or if they fell behind academically. Students indicated a sense of disappointment and abandonment in not being heard or supported by teachers, and for many students this ultimately led to them either being asked to leave, or disengaging through non-attendance. Alongside this, many students made direct reference to staff in their reasons for the study school having appeal, including feeling as though they could talk to staff and that the staff cared about what was going on with them. These findings suggested that the school model, which included an explicit focus on developing SSRs, was an effective means of engaging these students in education—clearly, their relationship with school staff was a large part of the school’s appeal and helped these students to feel connected to the school.

The demographic profile of students involved in this study indicated that many are likely to be at risk of becoming disengaged from mainstream education. Many students were socio-economically disadvantaged, and a number had mental health or drug and alcohol concerns. While it was beyond the scope of this study to compare the experiences of these students to those from more advantaged homes, the findings of this study indicated that these students did struggle in a mainstream school environment and that their relationships with teachers was implicated in this. The sense that students felt disliked or un-noticed in large schools, or let down by teachers in the mainstream system, was clear in the responses. As identified in the literature, positive SSRs can play a crucial role for disadvantaged students in enabling them to cope in a mainstream school environment.

There are several limitations to this study that should be noted. First, the data collected were from one school only. Data also did not reflect the experiences of students who may not be as engaged in the study school, as those who do not attend regularly were unlikely to participate. Future research would benefit from a recruitment approach that targets students who are not regularly attending class.