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The complexity of disengagement with education and learning: A case study of young offenders in a secure custodial setting in England

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Abstract

This study explored the nature of disengagement in young people serving custodial sentences. This was in order to gain new theoretical insights into strategies for their re-engagement with education. This is because 90% of young offenders who drop out of school prior to incarceration are reportedly disengaged (dropout being an indicator of disengagement). This paper reports on a qualitative ethnographic case study in one secure children's home in England. Semi-structured interviews with 16 incarcerated young people were conducted from which five participated in in-depth case studies along with teachers and care staff. Data were collected as participants engaged with a learning opportunity over a period of time. Extending emerging theory of disengagement, findings showed that disengagement oscillated between both active and passive forms within the same individual and pointed to the need for a range of strategies needed for re-engagement. This paper suggests that disengagement is complex where the physical and social context shapes how disengagement manifests. This has pedagogical implications for education in custodial settings and other at-risk children in alternative or mainstream education provision.

Introduction

This paper focuses on the re-engagement of young people with education, who having been convicted and sentenced for contravening the law, are housed within a secure custodial setting. These are children at risk and considered ‘doubly vulnerable’ (Moore & Miller, 1999) because of their age and their status as offenders making them susceptible to marginalisation when back in the community. They would also have been considered at risk before incarceration given that many young people who offend have multiple disadvantages which impact their education, including poverty, lower socioeconomic status, family breakdown, and other such circumstances. Added to these are a higher prevalence of drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems and learning difficulties (Chitsabesan & Hughes, 2016; Hughes et al., 2015), emotional problems (Abram, Teplin, McClelland, & Dulcan, 2003), behavioural problems (Young, Moss, Sedgwick, Fridman, & Hodgkins, 2015) as well as language and communication difficulties (Snow, Woodward, Mathis, & Powell, 2016).

Given these, it is not surprising that many young people with a custodial sentence enter the secure setting disengaged with education and learning, indicated by the 90% that have dropped out of mainstream school prior to incarceration (Little, 2015). For educational initiatives to be effective, learners need to be engaged with their learning (Prior & Mason, 2010; Crick, 2012; Case & Haines, 2015). In order to (re)engage young people in conflict with the law, there needs to be a better understanding of engagement and disengagement that acknowledges their previous educational experiences as well as the constraints of secure custodial contexts.

Education in custody

The youth justice system in England is obliged to provide young people with a statutory 30 hours per week of educational provision, whether their sentence is custodial or

within the community. The custodial school setting is a secure and locked environment with much less family or external involvement than would be in mainstream school settings. Learners are more likely to have learning, emotional and behavioural difficulties (Hughes, 2012), mental health issues (Chitsabesan & Hughes, 2016) and low educational aspirations (Oser, 2006). Provision is disjointed and of a lower quality than mainstream schooling, holding a marginal status (Frolander-Ulf & Yates, 2001). The youth custodial population is transient resulting in diminished aspirations from both the teacher and pupil perspective (Sander, Sharkey, Olivarri, Tanigawa, & Mauseth, 2010). Combined, these make the school in a secure context quite different to mainstream school, even if it emulates school as in a classroom with a teacher and a curriculum.

There is considerable evidence that experiences of education and formal learning for young people who come into conflict with the law have been disruptive and unfulfilling (Cripps & Summerfield, 2012; Graham, Bergen, & Sweller, 2016; Little, 2015). School dropout is used as an indicator of disengagement (Chapman, Laird & Ifill, 2011), where as many as 9 out of 10 young people who offend have dropped out of school before being incarcerated (Little, 2015) and so this suggests that many have become disengaged and disaffected early in their educational careers (Kirk & Sampson, 2013). The link between disengagement from education and offending, is by no means causal (Moffitt, 2005) but has been difficult to ignore (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011).

The research conducted in secure education settings is not plentiful and tends to refer to the success of interventions in terms of measurable outcomes, such as reduced reoffending rates, rather than for the young people for whom they are intended (e.g. (Wexler, Pyle, Flower, Williams, & Cole, 2014; Steele, Bozick, & Davis, 2016) They also reflect an ideology based on a 'correctional', 'authoritarian' and 'punitive'

approach. There is much less focus on the individual or how education could be meaningful and transformative at a personal level (Behan, 2014).

One example is Little's (2015) research who focused on a Young Offenders Institution (YOI) within England with data from the young people themselves. Little (2015) found that the most successful learning activity was a project which involved learners caring for birds of prey housed in the YOI. It was effective in engaging even the most vulnerable and disengaged young people, attributed to the autonomy and responsibility that it enabled the young people to take on. Little argues that education in secure settings needs to respond to the specific needs of these young people. To do that, it is necessary to understand more about the nature of dis/engagement in this population.

A personalised approach to education is more effective in engaging young people with learning (Crick, 2012). For example Behan (2014) found that if education is personal or *anthropocentric* (authentic), it can be transformative for the learner. Even though Behan's research was with adult learners in prison, Knight (2014) also showed in her research with young people who were serving community sentences, that interventions which took a personalised approach were much more effective in engaging the young people. As young people who offend have been shown to be disengaged with education and learning (Cripps & Somerfield, 2012, Little, 2015; Graham et al, 2016), it becomes important to understand the nature of dis/engagement within this group. The secure custodial setting and, particularly the secure children's home (SCH), with a smaller staff-pupil ratio, presents greater opportunity for individual and personalised interventions in education.

Engagement

Engagement with education and learning is a key contributor to learning and academic success (Crick, 2012; Fredricks, 2011; Fredricks et al., 2016). Importantly, engagement is a malleable construct responsive to teachers or schools' efforts and therefore, an ideal point for interventions (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Engagement is a complex multidimensional construct consisting of 3 main components, the behavioural, the cognitive and the emotional (affective) (Fredricks et al., 2004). The behavioural element refers to student conduct in the educational setting with school absenteeism, dropout or poor conduct used as indicators (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Emotional engagement refers to a student's attachment to school, teachers and peers. Studies in this area use enjoyment, boredom or anxiety during academic activity (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2008) as indicators of engagement. Others focus on belonging or relatedness to the school community (Voelkl, 2012). Cognitive engagement tends to be about the extent to which a learner psychologically invests in academic activities and the extent of self-regulation in attending to and sustaining a task as indicative of cognitive engagement (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012). Reeve and Tseng (2011) proposed agency as a fourth component, based on the idea that learners do not just *react* but are proactive agents.

Lawson (2017) categorised engagement research into three main approaches: state-based, process-based and trait-based/identity-laden. The state based research focuses on how the learner responds to learning in context, concerned with creating a responsive environment that facilitates learning through effective relationships within a classroom situation (e.g. (Shernoff, Ruzek, & Sinha, 2017)). The process-based approach is rooted in theories of motivation and that re-engagement processes that appeal to learner motivations is key in understanding engagement (e.g. Earl, Taylor, Meijen, & Passfield,

2017). The trait-based or identity laden construct is concerned with understanding how engagement varies in different groups or subgroups in order to effectively re-engage them (e.g. Lawson & Masyn, 2015). Lawson (2017) highlights how these approaches have provided ‘theoretically sound, research supported models’ (Lawson, 2017, p.235) in understanding the concept. However, he points out that the complexity of ‘today’s diverse students and today’s global educational policy environment’ (Lawson, 2017, p.236) calls for the next frontier to be focused on ‘innovative and context specific, practice-embedded research’ (Lawson, 2017, p.236). This paper reports on research that not only crosses all three of Lawson’s categories of research, but also aimed to further theoretical understanding using qualitative methods to understand how to *re-engage*. It is to this end that this study focused on the concept of *disengagement*, which by inference has to consider implications for *re-engagement* for genuine practical application.

Engagement is considered a protective factor against delinquency and problem behaviours, such as truanting, substance abuse and offending behaviour (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Many of the characteristics in young people who offend relate to disengagement, for example, withdrawal, disruptive or distracted behaviours (Little, 2015; Graham et al, 2016; Earl et al., 2017). Continued disengagement can lead to school dropout (Dale, 2010) which can increase the propensity to become involved with offending behaviour (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011).

Disengagement

Teachers face many pupils who are disruptive, do not participate or withdraw (Earl et al., 2017) which has an impact on the teacher, other learners and the individual themselves. However, attempts to conceptually understand *disengagement* have not received proportionate research attention (Earl et al., 2017; ahmed Shafi, 2018a). The

behaviour management literature attempts to do this but comes from the perspective of *managing* behaviour to re-engagement as a means to improve behaviour specifically, rather than re-engagement in a more holistic way. This section problematises engagement as a concept for exploring ‘disengagement’ and Fredricks (2016) pointed out how disengagement is distinct (e.g. (Skinner et al 2008; Wang, Chow, Hofkens, & Salmela-Aro, 2015); Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2016; Earl et al., 2017).

Skinner et al (2008) emphasised that different strategies are needed in order to re-engage the disengaged. The table below adapted from Skinner et al (2008) demonstrated how they conceptualised disengagement, choosing to use the word disaffections to distinguish disengagement conceptually from engagement.

Table 1 A motivational conceptualisation of engagement and disengagement (disaffection) (adapted from Skinner et al, 2008)

| | Engagement | Disengagement (Disaffection) |
|-----------|--|--|
| Behaviour | A Behavioural Engagement Action initiation Effort, Exertion Attempts, Persistence Intensity Attention, Concentration Absorption Involvement | B Behavioural Disengagement/disaffection Passivity Giving up Withdrawal Inattentive Distracted Disengaged Unprepared |
| Emotion | C Emotional Engagement Enthusiasm Interest Enjoyment Satisfaction Pride Vitality Zest | D Emotional disengagement/disaffection Boredom Disinterest Frustration/anger Sadness Worry/anxiety Shame Self-blame |

The column that refers to disengagement suggested a range of behavioural and emotional responses that are different to the engagement column. For example, a learner who is displaying a lack of effort or exertion (Box A) is not necessarily the same as giving up (Box B), and would most likely require different strategies for re-engagement. Similarly, a learner who is experiencing frustration or anger (Box D) is not just having an absence of enjoyment (Box C) and where increasing enjoyment simplistically would not lead to reduced frustration or anger. Clearly, frustration and anger would need different strategies for re-engagement than someone who is not enjoying a lesson. Jang et al (2016) also conceptualised disengagement as related to engagement, but separate. They based this on their finding that positive and negative emotions are independent and not opposites because they have different characteristics. Extending the work of Jang et al (2016), Earl et al (2017) distinguished between *active* and *passive* disengagement. Active disengagement is characterised by ‘reactive and animated types of maladaptive behaviour that is both noncompliant and off-task in nature’ (Earl et al., 2017, p.33) and passive disengagement is characterised by being ‘unresponsive to teacher or peer interactions that relate to classwork, often not attempting tasks, and avoiding or refusing to answer questions’ (Earl et al., 2017, p.33). Passively disengaged students are less likely to attract the teacher’s attention and become withdrawn. It seems clear that these behaviours would require different types of interventions. Young people in a secure custodial setting, tend to be actively disengaged, however, there are also those described as passively disengaged. Research on understanding disengagement in young people who offend offers one way to deepen understanding of this concept with opportunities for more effective interventions.

Like other process-based research on engagement, Earl et al (2017) draw on the psychological needs of autonomy and competence, both rooted in self-determination

theory. Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is a motivation-based theory of human behaviour focused on three psychological needs: competence, autonomy and relatedness. Competency needs refers to a person's belief about how effective they are, or could be, in interaction with their environment and autonomy is about how a person can express their authentic selves and direct their own behaviour. Relatedness is about a person's need to feel connected or belong to a community or group. Earl et al (2017) found that a frustration of the psychological needs of autonomy and competence relate to active and passive disengagement, respectively, arguing that learners' basic psychological needs are frustrated, as opposed to contributing to active disengagement. Earl et al (2017) did not give consideration to relatedness needs in their study. Given that young offenders are likely to be disengaged on entry, education in custody presents a space where the high stakes curriculum and assessment pressures are looser, providing an opportunity for innovation, to take risks in order to re-engage them.

The malleability of engagement (Goldspink & Foster, 2013) suggests that teachers and the school or learning context are also likely to have contributed to disengagement (Shernoff et al., 2017) - that it is not just a 'deficit' in the learner. Consequently, teachers and context are a key part in re-engagement. Alternative approaches, such as providing a relevant and meaningful curriculum (Crick, 2012) or the use of person-orientated techniques (Eccles & Wang, 2012) should be considered as a way to re-engage disengaged learners within the custodial setting. This presents an opportunity to tap into the existing knowledge of learners as a starting point, thereby focusing on interest and involvement, which form a part of the deeper structure of engagement (Goldspink & Foster, 2013). The interest and involvement aspect of pedagogy also play a role in meeting autonomy and competency needs.

Conceptualising disengagement for young people in custody

A conceptualisation of disengagement for young people in conflict with the law needs to be much more responsive to the specific context and their needs. These include, but are not limited to, the transient nature of pupils in a secure setting; the limited number of subjects available; the varying abilities and experiences; the high prevalence of learning difficulties; emotional, behavioural difficulties and; the varying lengths of sentences. These contextual challenges mean that the approaches used to engage students in a mainstream setting are not necessarily effective for young people in a secure setting, reflecting the trait-based or identity-laden approach (Lawson, 2017). This research is however also state-based because emotions and how a learner responds to a learning situation is considered key; it is also process-based because it draws upon individual learner authentic motivations. Thus, whilst Lawson (2017) insists that new research should focus on theory and application to practice, it should not be limited to remaining within the research typologies identified by Lawson. To do so would be to simplify the complexity that research has thus far identified.

This paper reports on research that explored the nature of disengagement in young people in secure custodial settings to further theoretical understandings with the aim of *re-engaging* them while serving their custodial sentences. The research draws on self-determination theory (SDT) (Dweck, 1985) as a framework to interrogate and interpret the data. SDT is based on a belief in humans as curious, agentic, inspired, striving to learn to master new skills and extend themselves. The key components competence, autonomy and relatedness were useful concepts in exploring the data.

Method

The context

Since 2008, there has been a sharp decline in the number of young people in custody, from 3,019 to circa 900 in 2017 (Youth Justice Board, 2016). While this is welcomed, it means that those who have been convicted tend to have the most complex of problems (Taylor, 2016). In the UK, there three main types of custody for children and young people, typically dependent on age. Those aged 10-15 years are placed in Secure Children's Homes (SCH), over 15s are usually placed in Young Offender Institutions (YOI) or Secure Training Centres (STC).

Research design

Qualitative studies of young people who offend are not plentiful and neither is there much qualitative research on understanding disengagement (Fredricks et al., 2016). Thus, this was an exploratory qualitative ethnographic case study conducted over two main phases in one of the 14 SCHs in England which accommodated up to a maximum of 24 children. Phase I explored the educational experiences of young people in custody, their perception of themselves as learners and, sought to understand facilitators and barriers to their learning. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews, observations and field notes with 16 young people aged 13-17 years of age, generating over 370 minutes of data. Phase II consisted of five case studies with participants from Phase I invited to take part along with their learning mentors, teacher and Head Teacher. These comprised an authentic inquiry process (Crick, 2009, 2012), designed to build personally relevant knowledge which could also be educationally useful to them in the secure setting as a way to re-engage participants. The aim of this Phase was to re-engage learners with education and learning opportunities and generated a further 400 minutes of verbal data, field notes and observation data. This

paper reports on one element of the findings that relate specifically to disengagement. Other papers include the navigating of ethical and methodological considerations (ahmed Shafi 2018b) and another paper on the nature of the secure context itself is the subject of an upcoming Special Issue in an international journal which is under review.

Authentic inquiry is ‘shaped by the learner’s interest, driven by her curiosity and purpose, yet is capable of supporting the delivery of the valued outcomes of a publicly accountable curriculum.’ (Crick, 2009, p.73). As a pedagogical tool, it has been shown to appeal to disengaged learners (Jaros & Deakin Crick, 2007), typically starting with a concrete place, object or experience of relevance or importance in the life of the learner. Through the learning journey this can develop into, for example, an artefact, in the form of a poster, presentation, artwork, essay or poem relevant to the curriculum for the topic. Authentic inquiry connects the learner’s interest and knowledge creation with formal education and provided a framework for data collection at various points. Over 45 interviews, 900 minutes of data were generated plus observations and field notes from the young people, their learning mentors, teachers and the headteacher. This enabled insight into (re)engagement during the learning process. There were a number of methodological and ethical challenges and dilemmas throughout this research and a recent paper focuses specifically on these (see ahmed Shafi, 2018b).

The participants

24 participants were involved in this research. They included the young people, their learning mentors, core subject teachers and the head teacher. Purposive sampling based mainly on the young person’s willingness to participate, length of sentence and suggestions by gatekeepers (Reeves, 2010) was used for selection. This reflected the restricted autonomy and agency of the young people, where gatekeepers had the

ultimate decision on who participated. The table in Appendix A summarises the type of custodial orders participants were serving. The table in Appendix B provides a description of the five young people who participated in Phase II and provide greater understanding of individual participants when interpreting the findings.

Findings

Phase I – Understanding disengagement

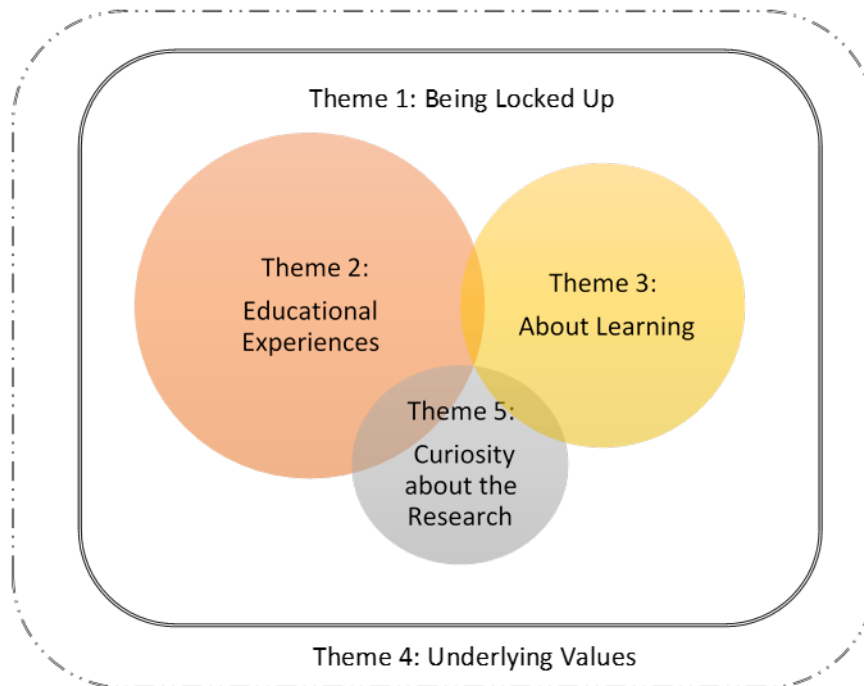
Analysis of data

The findings from Phase I were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2014), focusing on the young peoples' educational experiences as a tool to understand disengagement. Data were coded inductively (Frith & Gleeson, 2004) using both latent and semantic coding (Boyatzis, 1998). Although purely inductive coding is virtually impossible, the exploratory nature of this phase required a form of coding, which was not restricted by, but informed by theory. Latent coding was important in this context because through this, assumptions, ideologies and 'logic frameworks' (Braun and Clarke, 2014, p 89) that underpinned the overt content could be considered. This was necessary not only because the verbal skills of many of the participants were limited, but also because it enabled a deeper analysis of the data to understand the nature of the educational experiences of the participants and the underpinning values which may have shaped some of these experiences. These limitations also meant that an analysis of the entire interview as a whole was necessary rather than short extracts of text in order to get to the deeper meanings. Field notes and observation data were useful here. The theoretical framework of SDT was not treated as a binding or restricting factor (deductive) but rather to aid in illuminating findings and enhancing the explanatory element (abductive inferencing). In this sense, the analysis was an iterative process between data and theory.

Findings from Phase I

Five interconnected themes emerged: *Being Locked Up*; *Educational Experiences*; *About Learning*; *Underlying Values* and; *Curiosity about the Research*. The figure below summarises the relationship between the themes.

Figure 1 Five interconnecting themes from Phase I findings



The theme *Being Locked Up*, represented by the solid line, was significant and encased three of the other themes. The theme of *Educational Experiences* referred primarily to the secure setting, however, educational experiences prior to incarceration also shaped perceptions of the secure setting. *Educational experiences* were also related to the theme *About Learning* and referred specifically to awareness of the self as a learner, as well as how teachers and peers impacted their learning. The *Underlying Values* theme related to assumptions, ideologies and values about life that underpinned many of the other themes. This theme was represented by a semi-solid line outside of the *Being*

Locked Up context because values were likely to be independent of the secure context, but still impact on the interpretation of experiences within it. This theme helped get to a deeper level about views on education and learning, its purpose and relevance, offering insight into what could help potentially re-engage young people with education and learning in the secure setting. The values were underlying because they did not express themselves in ways evident in the other themes.

The key theme of *Being Locked Up* was dominated by the role of emotions and how they impacted on engagement (see Figure 2). Whilst the scope of the paper does not allow a full discussion, it is presented below to show how emotions featured heavily in this theme.

Figure 2 The Being Locked Up theme and subthemes

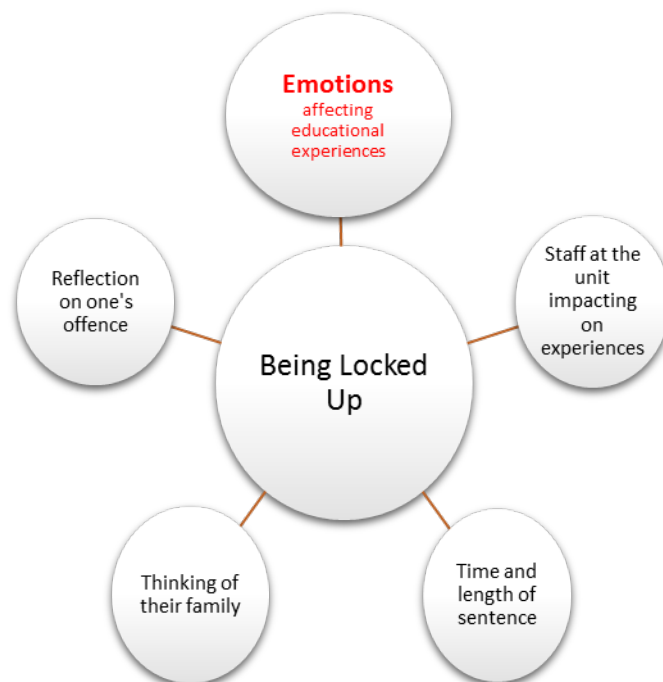
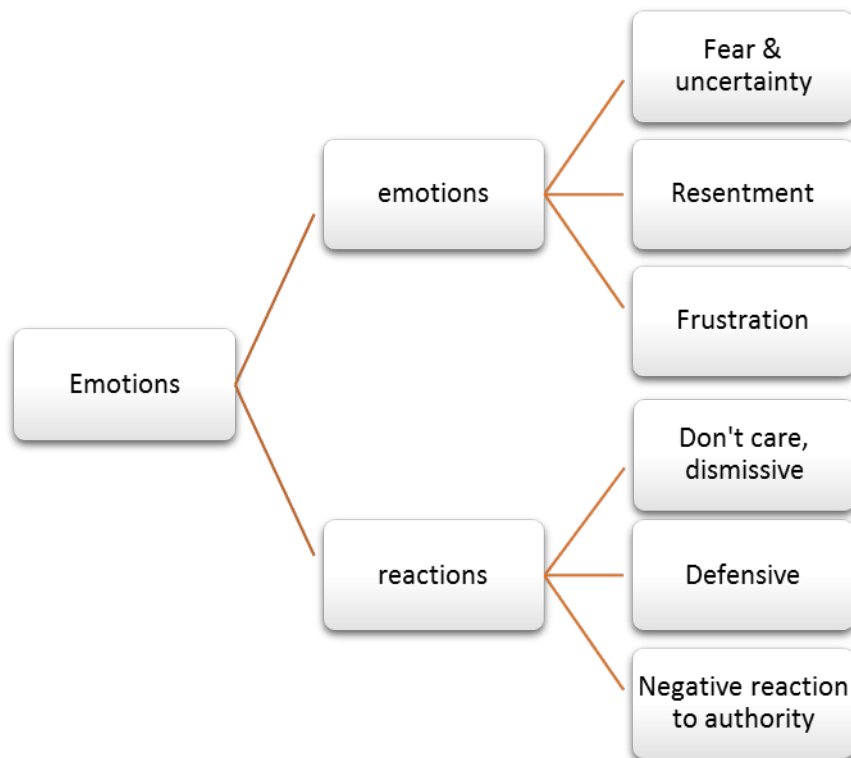


Figure 3 below ‘unpacks’ the complex way in which emotions were also reactions triggered by other emotions, themselves triggered by *Being Locked Up*.

Figure 3 Emotions heightened through being locked up



Drawing on self-determination theory, the data indicate how autonomy needs were frustrated through the locked up nature of the secure custodial setting and lead to emotions such as frustration, resentment and/or fear and uncertainty. These were then expressed through behaviours that indicated active disengagement (Earl et al., 2017).

*‘...wouldn’t you find it annoying if you were f*ing locked up all your b*tard day? (Tabitha, aged 14)*

There were however times when the same young person would display behaviours that reflected a passive form of disengagement such as being withdrawn, quiet and lethargic.

‘How would you feel if you were in a secure unit, you were leaving in 2-3 days, you’ve got nothing in place, no house? You don’t properly know exactly where you’re going to live. You’ve got no money, you’ve got no National Insurance number, no birth certificate, nothing to sort myself out. But they just

don't give a shit. It makes me angry and I just can't be bothered with it all
(Andrea, aged 17)

A passive form of disengagement reflects a frustration of competence needs. Andrea felt frustrated because she was unable to achieve what she wanted or needed to do and would demonstrate passive disengagement. However, Andrea would often display active disengagement. This demonstrated how the same individual would oscillate between active and passive forms of disengagement. The form of disengagement expressed was dependent on the learners' emotions, which appeared to be heightened by *Being Locked Up* and their interactions with staff and peers. This adds to our understanding of disengagement because it means that the same learner will require different strategies for re-engagement depending on which of their psychological needs are frustrated at the time.

For the young people in this study, their *Educational Experiences* were not positive and school prior to incarceration was reported as boring and irrelevant to their lives. Education at the secure unit was considered as poor quality and of a lower standard than mainstream school. The data from the young people showed that there was value for education as a whole and that a good education had benefits for the future. The theme *About Learning* demonstrated that the young people were very aware of themselves as learners and the role that teachers and their peers played in their learning and (dis)engagement.

'Peers can work both ways. They can help or they can disrupt.' (Damian, aged, 14)

'Because if the teacher gives you positive comments: you can do it. It makes you think you can, even if you can't. It makes you do it.' (Andrea, aged 17)

Learners were also deliberate in their responses to learning situations, rather than random and 'reactive'. This suggests that learning is possible if the learner puts their mind to it (autonomy) and if the social situation (in the form of teachers and peers) acted as facilitators.

'Yeah I just go yeah... Give up sort of, thing and obviously you act out because you're trying to hide the fact that you just gave up.' (Jamie, aged 15)

In summary, young people at the secure setting demonstrated awareness of themselves as learners and were able to identify facilitators and barriers to their own engagement, in quite sophisticated ways which has not been explored in previous studies. These findings also illustrated how the secure context had a profound effect on the young people in this study. Previous literature has not explored the impact of this context or previous educational experiences on the learning of young people whilst in custody.

Phase II – Re-engaging the disengaged

Analysis of data

These findings were analysed in two stages, the first analysed the five case studies individually. The second stage analysed data across the case studies for themes emerging as a whole, representing a multiple and layered form of analysis and ensured that as many perspectives as possible could be explored. As with Phase I, thematic analysis, latent and semantic coding (Boyatzis, 1998) as well as an abductive form of analysis were used. This was an iterative process, which enabled the theoretical framework (SDT) to be drawn upon to make sense of and explain the data.

Findings from Phase II

Table 2 below presents a summary of the case study findings. The nuances of case study data cannot be captured in such a table and are instead elaborated on through the remaining narrative of the Findings and Discussion sections of this paper whereas

Appendix A provides a description of the young people in each case study. Findings demonstrated that young people, described as disengaged could be re-engaged with education and learning in a secure setting, but this was to differing extents, depending on a range of barriers and facilitators. The case studies are summarised in the table and then described individually below.

Table 2 A summary of the case study findings from Phase II

| | Re-engaged? | Facilitators | Features of re-engagement | Barriers | Extended learning to broader context? |
|---------|---------------------|---|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| Jeremy | Yes | Supportive mentor Agency Task value | Autonomy needs met | Structure and system of secure context Competency needs Relatedness needs | No |
| Andrea | Yes. (Potential) | Task Value Glimpses of agency | Task value | No supportive mentor No time allowed. Additional support needs Both due to structure and system of secure context | No |
| Bradley | Yes | Supportive mentor Agency Task value | Autonomy needs met through task value | Time and access to resources through mentor | No |
| William | No. (Potential) | | Lack of autonomy needs being met | Mentor too directive, no task value, no agency | No |
| Jack | Yes | Supportive mentor Agency Task value | Autonomy needs met | Time and access to resources through mentor | Yes |

Jeremy – maintaining task value

When Jeremy had decided that the task was of value, relevant to him and he was confident in his abilities, Jeremy enacted characteristics of engagement. For example, when asked how he was getting on after starting his authentic inquiry, his response was:

‘It’s going very well! I’m almost finished [...] and I’m researching on the internet about conspiracy theories and trying to find some way to put it into something like a workbook or some sort of documentation so I can explain to people, I guess, but I’m just trying to get it organised.’ (Jeremy, aged 16)

This extract demonstrates enthusiasm, passion, agency, effort, action and planning for the next stage with an awareness of challenges – all indicators of behavioural and emotional engagement as per Skinner et al’s (2008) model. Reeve and Tseng (2011) point out, learners do not just react to learning, but pro-act too. Jeremy demonstrated cognitive engagement, which can be attributed to his own agency where he was taking charge of his learning. Unfortunately, Jeremy abandoned the authentic inquiry when the secure setting was unable to timetable Jeremy to have time with his mentor due to the routines and structure of the secure setting. Upon this, Jeremy showed frustration and aggression and disengaged from the process.

Andrea – meeting additional needs

Andrea demonstrated a willingness to engage with the authentic inquiry opportunity and saw the task as having value and she demonstrated agency in her assessment of how it could help her on her imminent release (Andrea wanted to write her CV as her artefact). She was able to identify skills she had (being multilingual) which could help her. However, Andrea was frustrated at the perceived lack of support from the secure unit staff, pointing to the importance of relationships with the staff. Andrea’s

frustration, disappointment and fear meant her competence and autonomy were compromised. The secure context had been a barrier to continued engagement in the authentic inquiry, despite Andrea showing initial engagement.

Bradley – conditions for autonomy

The identity challenges that Bradley was facing (See Appendix A) became a facilitator rather than a barrier for his authentic inquiry. This was because the conditions were also facilitating, for example, a mentor, time and resources to fulfil what he had planned. In the data, Bradley expressed satisfaction at what he had achieved and was also evident in his appearance as he would often ‘dress up’ for interviews in his latest makeup styles, demonstrating a growing confidence in his own identity. This indicated that for Bradley, conditions of autonomy were an important feature of his re-engagement facilitating agency in navigating his authentic inquiry. However, the data from teachers showed that the benefits were not transferred beyond the authentic inquiry. This was perhaps because the authentic inquiries were not an embedded feature of learning at the secure unit, but a bolt-on research element. This seemed to have prevented the benefits from permeating into other learning contexts for Bradley and for Jeremy.

William – ensuring supportive mentors

William’s authentic inquiry did not start as planned or intended and consequently, William did not engage with the authentic inquiry to the extent he had shown potential for in his Phase I interview. However, William complied, going through the motions (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012) with his mentor Andrew, who led the entire process. When asked what the best and worst thing had been about the process, William commented:

‘The worst thing about it? How do I phrase this? Not being able to pick on one [topic] because of what other people think.’ (William, post authentic inquiry interview)

The above quote encapsulated why, for William, the authentic inquiry had not been as engaging a process as it had been for the others. William’s mentor had led the whole process and consequently emerged as a barrier, resulting in William continuing to be passively disengaged and generally co-operating at a very superficial level.

This demonstrated the need for a mentor to be led by the needs of the young person, highlighting the importance of relatedness whereby a connection or sense of belonging becomes important, even if it is just with one individual. William could have engaged with the authentic inquiry had he had the opportunity to select his own mentor rather than the mentor volunteering first. However, the challenges of the secure custodial setting constrained by the routines and structure of the setting had made choosing a mentor challenging and hence the mentor had ‘stepped up’ as a way of supporting William.

Jack – fostering agency

Despite Jack’s dissatisfaction, resentment, dependence on staff and a yearning for his family – given this opportunity of participating in the authentic inquiries, he was able to re-engage himself with learning. Jack’s learning was characterised by agency and enthusiasm, which had been facilitated by subject he was interested in (exercise and nutrition). Through this, Jack was able to reclaim some autonomy thwarted by the secure context. By meeting some of these needs, (autonomy, competency and relatedness) Jack was able to apply his competencies to other areas beyond the authentic inquiry such as becoming a young person’s representative at the secure setting. The

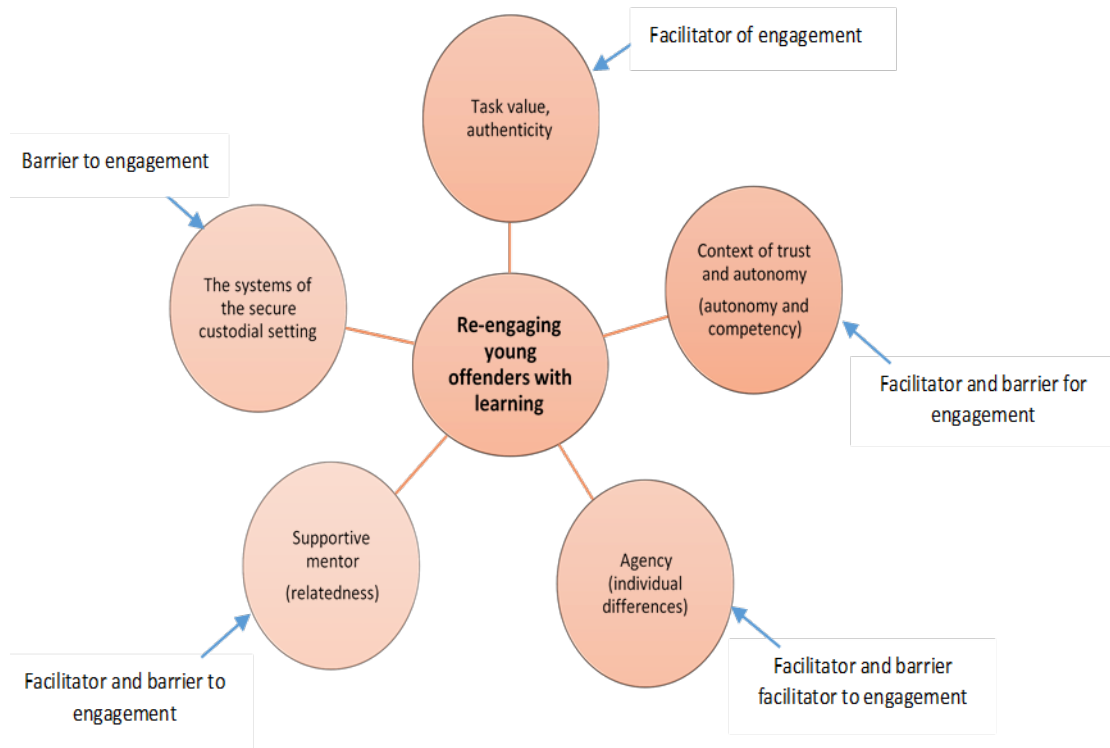
key had been Jack's mentor who provided a responsive level of support and space for autonomy, which had fostered Jack's new found agency.

The constraints of the secure custodial setting through its structures of line management had been barriers to engaging in the early stages of the process. However, as the authentic inquiry served to connect Jack to his own competences, Jack was able to emerge as a confident and engaged learner. Whilst the authentic inquiry cannot claim all credit for this, it seems clear that the opportunity afforded to Jack through this medium of learning re-connected him with learning.

Conditions for re-engagement

There were conditions that needed to be met in order to foster re-engagement that emerged from the Stage 2 analysis which explored the data across all case studies. These conditions included the need for a task to have value; the meeting of autonomy needs; the enabling of agency; a supportive mentor and; for the secure context to be facilitative in terms of its institutional structure. These conditions were categorised into facilitators and barriers. A clear distinction was not possible because a facilitator, dependent on the conditions, could also become a barrier. These are illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4 The facilitators and/or barriers to re-engagement



The fulfilment of autonomy needs featured in all the case studies as important in re-engaging the young people. This is not especially surprising as the nature of the secure custodial setting restricts individual autonomy. When the conditions and context facilitated individual autonomy, all learners were open to perceiving a task to have value. When a task was perceived to have value, it seemed to release a sense of agency within the learner and this agency was able to negotiate several of the barriers presented. However, the extent to which these barriers were negotiated did depend on the individual and their emotions.

In all the authentic inquiry case studies, the role of the mentor emerged to be a crucial social facilitator. This was not only through quality interactions (Goldspink & Foster, 2013) but also in terms of the access to resources, which they were able to facilitate. By respecting the choices and direction of the authentic inquiry, mentors were facilitating autonomy; by encouraging and stimulating, they were facilitating

competence and; by developing a relationship through friendship and trust, they were facilitating relatedness. Therefore, the role of the mentor was a significant one.

Agency was also influenced by the extent to which a participant's autonomy needs were being met. If autonomy needs were met, then the participant was more agentic. For example, Jack's agency seemed to contribute to enhanced feelings of autonomy. In this way, autonomy and agency interacted with each other. However, a context of autonomy was a pre-requisite for being agentic.

Task value was a facilitator in four cases. However, for sustained engagement, additional conditions were required. This was shown in the case of Jeremy where frustration due to barriers in the structures of the secure unit, meant that task value was not enough. Additional conditions needed to be met for the task to have continued value. Similarly, Jeremy's relatedness needs were also compromised through the lack of time with his mentor. Combined, these led to a disintegration of task value. Therefore, task value was only important when other conditions were met.

The secure context and its regime emerged as a key theme through all the Phase II case studies with significant barriers for engaging in the authentic inquiry. This connected back to the Phase I theme of *Being Locked Up* that shaped how participants responded to learning opportunities. In Phase II, the context continued to be significant, this time more in relation to the practical aspects of conducting their authentic inquiries, such as time with their mentor and access to resources.

In summary, the case studies demonstrated how the young people could be re-engaged with education and learning relatively quickly, if their psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness were met. An understanding of the nature of disengagement within these learners contributed to their re-engagement.

Discussion

Emotional and psychological needs characterise the nature of disengagement

In line with the literature, the findings emphasise the important role of emotions and how they impact behavioural engagement (Skinner et al. 2008; Li and Lerner, 2013). Emotions (and subsequent behaviours) such as fear & uncertainty, resentment, frustration, not caring, being dismissive, defensive and negatively reacting to authority tend to be those most likely associated with disengagement (Earl et al., 2017) rather than that of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004). The emotions generated through being locked up featured throughout the data and suggests that for young people in the secure unit emotions have a greater impact on engagement with learning than perhaps those in a mainstream school. These emotions were also dependent on the relationships and the context of interactions with staff and peers and thus inter-twined with the psychological need for relatedness (within self-determination theory). This suggested that whilst emotional engagement is an important component in engagement, the extent of the role of relationships in meeting the need for relatedness, characterised the nature of disengagement to a large extent. This was also evident in Phase II of the case study findings, for example, Andrea had a range of psychological and emotional needs that appeared to be unmet. These impacted her ability to appropriately seek support for her learning and consequently disengagement in lessons. It suggested that attention to supporting young people in managing their emotions through positive and supportive relationships at the secure unit would be an important endeavour in re-engaging them with education and learning.

Whilst young people who offend are more likely to suffer from emotional and psychological needs in any case (Chitsabesan & Hughes, 2016), this study showed that

attention to these needs are necessary not only to address the need itself but also to facilitate re-engagement with learning.

Re-engaging young people who offend with education and learning

This study has shown that it is possible to re-engage young people with education and learning in a secure custodial setting within a relatively short time. However, certain conditions needed to be met (see Figure 4). In the literature, successful interventions were those which had a personalised element to them in terms of connecting to the individual learner (Wexler et al., 2014; Steele et al., 2014; Behan, 2014). The authentic inquiries built on this notion by providing a learning opportunity that connected to learner identity and lifestory through something that was meaningful to them (Deakin-Crick 2012). Relationships, particularly with the mentor were a key facilitator and enabler for the other conditions for re-engaging young people in this study. These included the need for a task to have value, conditions which facilitated individual autonomy and enabled agency, the need for a supportive mentor and for the secure context to be facilitative in terms of its institutional structure.

However, meeting these conditions was not easy. In the case of, for example, William, the mentor was unable to create the conditions of autonomy that connected to William's identity and lifestory (See Appendix A) which were needed in order for William to re-engage. Because of this, the mentor was unable to stimulate agentic involvement from William. Deakin Crick (2012) did nevertheless, point out that agency is something that is *achieved* rather than possessed. Therefore, expecting agentic involvement of the learner is not an automatic given even if 'optimal conditions' are created. For William, it was possible that he needed a sustained period or potentially a new mentor in order to engage with the authentic inquiry and 'achieve' agency. In sum, all the case studies denoted the importance of the learning mentor as a key facilitator in re-engagement.

This re-iterated the importance of relatedness and relationships and their impact on emotions in re-engaging young people in secure custodial settings with education and learning.

These findings link in with the work of Reeve and Tseng (2011) who claimed that the established three-component model proposed by Fredericks et al (2004) was incomplete. Agency was key in determining the extent and endurance of the participant in the authentic inquiries in all five case studies (to varying degrees) and thereby demonstrated the importance of creating conditions of autonomy to foster agency and therefore, re-engagement.

Relationships facilitated agency, task value and therefore engagement. Skinner and Pitzer (2012) argued that task level engagement (Skinner & Pitzer, 2008) was the most important as that was the actual point of interaction with learning. However, the findings of this research indicated that although task level engagement was important, the context and relationships played a crucial role in the extent of engagement at task level. Thus, what emerged was almost a hierarchy in terms of the importance of conditions, whereby task value was only realised when facilitated by the other conditions being met.

It should be noted that the conditions that need to be met for authentic inquiry to be a 'successful' are also challenging. For example, William's case demonstrated that the mentor themselves is an agentic individual who entered the context with their own identity and lifestory which interact with the learner. To assume that an effective learning mentor will create the optimal 'conditions' for the authentic inquiry to be

transformative is not a 'given' in each case. Further, it is not possible to ignore the context specific and relationship specific nature of the authentic inquiry which meant that the benefits did not extend out to other areas of education. This could be because the secure unit as a broader context also acted as a barrier for almost all participants in the case studies. Nevertheless, the case studies demonstrated that learning had the *potential* to be transformative for even the most disengaged learner. This pointed to the importance of investing in relationships within the secure context and a reconsideration of the structures of the secure custodial setting in order to facilitate these.

Extending emerging theory of disengagement

The distinction between disengagement and engagement as distinct concepts was useful in exploring and in re-engaging young people in a secure setting with education and learning. The findings suggested that responding to the characteristics specifically associated with disengagement were instrumental in re-engaging these disengaged participants. For example, addressing acute boredom in learners with low engagement might involve making pedagogical changes to make a lesson more exciting but essentially focusing on the same content and overall structure. However, to re-engage a disengaged learner would require an alternative approach altogether, such as that provided by authentic enquiry. This was evident through both Phases I and II of this research which demonstrated the extent to which previous unfulfilling educational experiences and how they interacted with being in a custodial educational context, meant that a personalised and deliberate approach to re-engagement that goes beyond the strategies for those with (acute) low engagement, is necessary.

This research has shown that the nature of disengagement in incarcerated young people was fluid, according to their emotional and psychological needs, manifesting as active and passive forms of disengagement in response to the context. For example, the same learner displayed both animated and disruptive behaviours (active disengagement) as well as withdrawn and quiet behaviours (passive disengagement), depending on their emotional and psychological condition at the time. This extends emerging theoretical understandings of disengagement, which focus on either passive or active disengagement expressed (Jang et al., 2016; Earl et al., 2017). In their study, Earl et al (2017) indicated this to be an unexpected finding - though one they could not ignore because it reappeared throughout their analysis. The findings from this study shed more light on these findings by showing how active and passive disengagement can co-exist in the same person and manifest at different times.

For example, Jeremy, like many of the participants, demonstrated both active and passive forms of disengagement according to his teachers and mentor, contrary to Earl et al's (2017) findings. Jeremy was quite confident in his own competences but still demonstrated characteristics of passive disengagement as did Andrea and Bradley. Disengaged learners whose autonomy needs are frustrated can respond in different ways according to the (local) context and/or their emotions. For example, William's interviews described a frustration of autonomy needs but he displayed passive disengagement. In all the case studies, the relationship (or absence of it) shaped the extent to which the young person engaged and negotiated the barriers. It highlights how a responsive mentor/educator could effectively employ strategies depending on how the learner was presenting at any one time – active, passive or moving between both.

This is an important finding because it not only gives greater insight into the nature of disengagement in young people who offend but also adds to the theoretical understanding of disengagement. Understanding the nature of disengagement in some of the most troubled and disengaged young people in the UK (Ministry of Justice, 2013) can help non-offending disengaged and at risk learners in alternative or mainstream school settings. In terms of the engagement literature as a whole, this finding emphasised further the role of emotions and psychological needs in engagement and how the more disengaged the learner, the more important emotions and social interactions seem to become.

Conclusions

Young people perceived education at the secure unit to be of poor quality. The secure context itself generated strong emotions that shaped young people's interactions with staff, which in turn shaped their perceptions and experiences of education in the unit. Young people in this research were disengaged with education, however, they oscillated between different types of disengagement (passive and active) (Earl et al., 2017) and this was dependent upon the learning context at any given time. These findings showed that categorising young people into one or other type of disengagement was too simplistic, thereby extending theoretical understandings of disengagement as a concept. This has pedagogical implications in that there is a need for educators to be responsive to the manifestation of disengagement in the individual at any one time.

This study also suggested that young people who offend are *active* agents in disengagement *and* re-engagement. The young people were aware of the dynamic and complex interactions between themselves, their peers and their teachers in assessing how they responded to learning. Education at a secure unit could seek to capitalise on

this awareness and agency for re-engagement in learning. Indeed, this case study research has shown that given certain conditions, it is possible to re-engage young people in custody with education and learning relatively easily.

The current policy context points towards education being central in a secure setting for young people (see Taylor report, 2016). However, this advocates an overhaul of the entire system, requiring considerable and sustained effort. The recommendations from this research are, however, embeddable within existing provision. For example, professional development and specific training could highlight the nature of disengagement in this group of learners. This may then shape pedagogical approaches for these learners. Embedding authentic inquiry across a secure unit as part of the induction process, improving collaboration between education and care staff at an organisational level, and instilling a unit-wide culture focused on facilitating re-engagement, have the potential for offering young people who offend conditions for re-engagement. This research has shown how the conditions are vital for re-engagement and relate largely to the culture and the interactions within the secure setting. Making such changes could have benefits which extend beyond the educational arena and contribute to supporting the emotional and psychological needs of the young people. These policy recommendations do not require structural changes to the secure custodial arrangements. Instead, these requires a focus on building relationships in a custodial setting for young people who offend and which foster the conditions needed for re-engagement with learning. These findings also have utility for disengaged or at risk young people in mainstream and alternative education provisions as well as those in conflict with the law.

Appendix A

The table below summarises the custodial sentences participants were serving.

Table 3 Custodial orders for the participants (Offence Type)

| | | |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Welfare Order | 2 | In custody because of a risk to the young person themselves |
| On Remand | 0 | Awaiting court appearance. Bail not given |
| DTO (Detention & Training Order) | 7 | Custodial sentence ranging from 4, 6, 8, 10, 12 or 24 months. Half the order spent in custody and half under supervision |
| Section 90/91 | 4 | Section 90 is an order if convicted for murder. Section 91 is an order which would be equivalent to 14 years if the offender was an adult. |
| Section 228/226 | 3 | Section 228 is an extended sentence for certain violent or sexual offences and is a fixed term sentence with automatic supervised release into the community at half way point. Section 226 is detention for public protection which is broadly comparable to a discretionary life sentence and can be used where Section 228 is deemed not suitable |

Appendix B

Description of participants in Phase II (young people)

Jeremy. 16 years. British with mixed European heritage

Jeremy was a Christian and regularly read the bible. Teachers, observations and field notes indicated Jeremy to be polite and generally non-disruptive, though sometimes arrogant and un-cooperative. Described by staff as intelligent with several GCSEs grades A-C. Jeremy had dropped out of school for more than 6 months and was not in mainstream school when convicted. He was serving an 18+ month sentence for manslaughter with no previous known offence.

Andrea. 17 years. Born in Britain but non-British background and multilingual.

Andrea was a victim of abuse and had a chequered educational history and although undiagnosed had a range of learning difficulties and no GCSEs. Andrea had been excluded, attended a PRU then enrolled at college on a hair and beauty course. Andrea was serving a 6-month sentence for robbery with no previous known offence.

Bradley. 13 years. White British. One of 9 children raised by mother.

Bradley described himself as feminine and was clear in his desire and goal to be a girl. Bradley's gender identity had shaped his earlier school life and was bullied in school. Bradley was occasionally aggressive, strong and tall which was at odds with his feminine nature, making it difficult for classmates to know how to interact with him. Bradley was described as intelligent and had attended a PRU. Convicted of a serious sexual offence, serving an 18-month sentence with no previous known offence

William. 16 years. African American heritage. Originally from the USA,

William's family placed a high value on education and had high expectations where William felt the pressure to achieve high grades. The move had however shaped and contributed to William's strong political views. Described as very able and a deep thinker, William had declined to take his GCSEs and dropped out of mainstream school for more than 6 months prior to conviction. William was serving a sentence 12+ month sentence for aggravated burglary with no previous known offence.

Jack. 16 years. White British.

Jack was mild mannered, sociable, rarely raising his voice or being aggressive. Jack resented his sentence as a first offence which meant he complained and moaned throughout. Jack was very conscious of his recent weight gain and wanted to get fit and healthy. Jack was the only young person at the secure unit who had come from a

mainstream school with a relatively stable family life and some GCSEs. Jack was serving a 12-month sentence for a sexual offence with no previous known offence.

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