Why school engagement matters

School engagement refers to students’ level of involvement, commitment and effort in relation to their school careers. Whilst much has been written on the processes and outcomes of engagement, there is a general consensus that a lack of student engagement is associated with poorer academic attainment and a greater propensity to drop out of school prematurely. Policy makers and schools often seek to tackle disengagement by targeting ‘problematic’ behaviours (e.g. low attendance levels or being disruptive in class) and poor academic outcomes. However, recent studies have also emphasised the positive impact that the promotion of engagement for all students can have in an academic setting as a whole.

In particular, high levels of school engagement have been shown to be associated with positive youth development outcomes, academic success and psychological well-being. Conversely, student disengagement can have negative effects that persist well beyond the end of compulsory education and have serious consequences on an individual level, including reduced employment opportunities and economic independence, poor health outcomes and even increased mortality. On the societal level, high levels of school disengagement can, in the long run, negatively impact economic and labour market efficiency, the sustainability of the welfare system and public health.

Decisions made by young people undertaking post-16 transitions are crucially important for their future. Studies on dropout, disruptive transitions and young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) emphasise these decisions are the end result of a gradual process of disengagement from school.

‘Raising the Participation Age’ and risks of becoming NEET

In accordance with the Government’s policy of Raising the Participation Age, Local Authorities have a statutory duty to track young people’s participation between the ages of 16 and 18 and to identify those who are not participating in education, employment or training.

Emphasis has been placed on the early identification of young people who are ‘at-risk of becoming NEET’, so that the appropriate support can be provided to help them to re-engage.

Co-operation with schools and post-16 education providers is of key importance in ensuring that young people continue to participate in education or training up to the age of 18.

Effective monitoring systems can provide an early warning mechanism for the students most vulnerable to disengaging from school and having unclear post-16 plans.
Identifying at-risk students

Current monitoring systems to identify young people at-risk of disengagement and becoming NEET tend to focus on demographic data, as well as school attainment and attendance information.

Analysis of the RESLeu survey with 3,000 young people in the UK (see box on last page) confirms that some groups do appear to be more likely to report being disengaged from school (i.e. engagement level significantly below average).

In particular, there appears to be a modest gender effect, whereby boys are more likely to be disengaged than girls (figure 1). However, when gender is combined with ethnicity, there are some groups who report much higher levels of school disengagement than others. In particular, figure 2 shows that Black Caribbean and White British students are more likely to be disengaged, and equally so across genders. Among some of the other ethnic groups, for example ‘White Others, boys are significantly more likely to be disengaged than girls. The data also show that lower socio-economic status (SES) groups are more likely to be disengaged from school with a significantly greater proportion of students with parents in routine or manual occupations reporting low levels of school engagement (figure 3).

The variations seen between different socio-demographic groups highlights that young people from different backgrounds can experience and negotiate their academic pathways very differently, even within the same school setting. Potentially ‘at risk’ groups require monitoring to ensure they are adequately supported and do not become disengaged, although this should be done by avoiding stereotyping and recognising the ways in which individual characteristics and social structures interact.
Engaging students: going beyond structural factors

Characteristics such as a young person’s developmental stage, their relationships with parents, teachers and peers, and the institutional setting they find themselves in at school, all contribute to differences in individual levels of engagement. Therefore, the role of schools, families and communities in influencing youth development and outcomes must be highlighted as providing key opportunities for promoting students’ engagement.

Statistical modelling of the RESL.eu survey data in the UK allows us to explore which are the most important factors influencing young people’s engagement at school. By far the largest influence comes from: (1) an individual’s own academic ‘self-concept’ – that is, students’ own belief in their ability to succeed at school – and (2) the level of support they perceive is available from their teachers.

Other key contributors to the model are levels of parental support and having peers with high aspirations, focused towards academic success. Whilst gender was significant, figure 4 shows that the extent to which it contributed to an individual’s school engagement was relatively very modest.

This suggests the absolute importance of self-perceptions and key personal relations in the individual pathways determining levels of school engagement, well beyond the predictive power of specific demographic and socio-economic characteristics and irrespective of specific school settings.

Of course, this does not mean that structural factors are not relevant - on the contrary, the contextual element and the ways in which young people interact with it on the basis or their social, demographic and economic background is crucial.

The interplay between these is so complex that a statistical model cannot disentangle the role of each of these individual factors on its own. What our model helps us identifying, however, are those dimensions which seem to matter for every young person, those which can be the centre of policy, pedagogic and pastoral interventions at local and even international level.

In particular, the extent to which students perceive that support is available to them, from a variety of sources – not least from their teachers – is a key factor and, by promoting these perceptions of support, young people’s school engagement is also improved.

Figure 4: key explanatory factors of School Engagement

This charts summarises the results of a statistical model (multivariate regression) analysing the extent to which individual factors contribute to the variability in the levels of school engagement.

The numbers next to the bubbles indicate the ‘beta value’ (i.e. individual effect) of each factor.
**Recommendations**

**Implementation of ‘school engagement risk assessment’ toolkits:** these can be used at school- and class-level to identify individual students who report low engagement, as well as at school level in cooperation with local authorities to identify areas where resources may be focused.

**Introduction of policies, programmes and measures** to promote engagement for all students and to develop a ‘culture’ of engagement with school. This can be implemented at school- and class-level, as well as through inter-school collaboration.

**Development of measures and interventions targeted at specific ‘risk’ groups:** risk should be determined not only on the basis of socio-demographic, and attainment and attendance data, but should also take into consideration students’ self-perceptions and the level of support they feel is available to them.

**Evaluation of measures and interventions on the basis of student feedback:** teachers, schools and local authorities should use students’ own perceptions as a key evaluation tool. In particular, both the added academic benefit and the extent to which students have perceived increased pastoral support should be taken into account when evaluating the success of a measure.

The RESL.eu team is currently working with local authorities and practitioners to pilot, develop and implement a ‘school engagement risk assessment’ toolkit.

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**About the RESL.eu research project**

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**About the researchers**

Dr Alessio D’Angelo is co-director of the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC) at Middlesex University. He has extensive experience in conducting research on a wide range of areas. Recent projects include large grants from research councils and work commissioned by public bodies and community organisations.

Neil Kaye is an early career researcher at the SPRC at Middlesex University. He has already gained experience in working across a number of projects and fields, using a range of data collection and analysis techniques. He has been involved in co-ordinating the RESL.eu survey of almost 20,000 young people across the EU.

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