

Improving educational outcomes for young people: influencing motivation through focused activities

Report of findings – REACH

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Introduction

This qualitative research study investigated perceptions of young people's motivation, in the context of REACH, alternative education provision (AEP). Accounts of young people's motivation were collected from adult stakeholders to show their understanding of motivation and how they think it can change in practice. These findings were then compared to theories of motivation in the psychology literature.

Research method

Research participants included school staff, parents and staff from REACH, in addition, four observation days were conducted. Semi-structured interviews and a 'Motivation Scenario Activity' were used to elicit perceptions of motivation. Although the number of participant was small, the accounts provide an insight into how young people's motivation is understood in practice at REACH.

Findings

The research had three main findings:

1. A shared understanding among adult stakeholders of young people's motivation, with five themes emerging from the data that reflect how motivation is understood; relationships, young people's participation in learning, social and emotional aspects, activities, and attainment.
2. Motivation was understood to change through the positive relationships that were established at REACH between youth workers and young people, together with the activities that young people participate in as part of their individual programmes. Whilst the relationships were thought to be fundamental, the findings reflect that the activities enable motivation to be influenced.
3. Positive relationships between REACH staff and parents, including direct communication and involvement in decisions about REACH provision and reviews, was valued by parents as helpful in changing young people's motivation, as parents were able to share in achievements and successes. When direct communication between parents and REACH was reported not to have occurred, this made it difficult for changes in young people's motivation to be observed by parents within the home environment and limited opportunities for parents to share in their young person's successes and achievements at REACH.

Recommendations

In order to further enhance the ways that REACH supports young people's motivation, three recommendations are made:

1. It could be beneficial for REACH staff to have some lectures on motivation. This could enable them to have a greater understanding of their practice and the reasons that approaches taken at REACH may be effective in changing motivation for some students but differ for others.

A greater understanding of the concept of motivation could be beneficial when the REACH Director meets with schools regarding referrals. For example, knowledge of theories of motivation could help in creating an individualised programme aimed to influence change in a student who was oriented towards performance goals rather than learning goals. Equally, awareness of a student who had no perceived sense of belonging, could help REACH create an activity programme to foster change in motivation through opportunities for group relatedness (sense of belonging).

2. It could be helpful for REACH staff to have awareness of the concept of Motivational Interviewing as this could further enhance the engagement between youth workers and young people which this study has shown is fundamental in influencing change in young people's motivation. The practice at REACH highlights similarities with the concept of Motivational Interviewing.

3. Developing contact and communication with all parents during a student's provision at REACH would optimise opportunities for parents to be informed of individualised programme objectives to meet their young person's needs. This would also provide opportunities for successes and achievements at REACH to be shared and celebrated within the home environment, fostering a joined-up approach to influencing change in personal attainment objectives such as motivation.

Significance of Research

This research is significant as it suggests that a model of AEP based on outdoor activities can influence effective change in young people's motivation. Notably, for educationalists and psychologists this research provides evidence of how the limited (governmental) regulation and requirements for AEPs have enabled REACH to be created and developed. Consequently, the flexible approach that REACH offers young people is perceived as success for their educational outcomes. Overall, the practice at REACH may provide insights into how the understanding of motivation in this context can influence changes in young people's motivation by applying a contemporary socio-cognitive approach. This model of practice could be adapted and used in other contexts of educational provision. Certainly, for psychologists, the framework for how motivation is understood at REACH may provide significant insights for comparison with other methods used in educational contexts to influence change in motivation.