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Running head: AP and SREG

Hard to reach and hard to teach: Supporting the self-regulation of learning in an alternative  
provision secondary school

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### **Abstract**

Since 2010 new types of state-funded schools have opened in England with a focus on providing alternative education provision. Very little is known about these schools, partly due to their novelty, and how they are attempting to re-engage those students who for various, and often complex, reasons have become disconnected from education. We scrutinised the approach used at one such school to examine what instructional practices were used, how they were adapted to the needs of the students and what factors enabled and obstructed (re)engagement. Data were collected over a month long fieldwork visit and included semi-structured interviews with staff and students and semi-structured classroom observations. Instructional approaches were used that supported the learning of students who were not experienced in, or had difficulty with, regulating their learning. These included breaking down tasks, providing lots of on-task prompts, encouragement, using frequent feedback and scaffolding, and offering quick support to students. This approach allowed students to re-engage with their learning and make progress towards important qualifications required for entry to the labour market and post-compulsory education and training.

*Keywords:* Alternative provision, free school, engagement, self-regulated learning

## **Re-engaging the hard to teach: Instructional practices and alternative provision**

### **Introduction**

In 2010, the United Kingdom parliament approved legislation to enable the creation of new state-funded schools in England (referred to as free schools) that were, unlike traditional schools, free from local authority control and governed by a charitable trust (Academies Act, 2010). These schools are similar to Charter schools in the United States and Canada. Under this arrangement, free schools can focus on providing alternative, rather than mainstream, educational provision for students who have stopped attending school often for multiple, complex and unique reasons (Cook, 2005; Pirrie et al., 2011). Partly due to their novelty, very little is known about this type of school, the practices used at such schools and what effects they may be having. The project described in this paper was conducted with one such school (in the parlance of the UK Department for Education an ‘alternative provision free school’) that aimed to re-engage students who had, for various reasons, become disconnected from their education. We focused in this paper on the instructional approaches used with students aged 14–16 years in their final two years of secondary education.

### **Alternative Provision**

Alternative provision (AP) refers to the education of students for whom mainstream schooling is no longer a viable option. It is described by the Department for Education (DfE) as “...for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed-period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour” (2013, p.3). These types of students are variously described as disengaged, disaffected or disconnected learners (e.g., Bryson, 2010; Kilpatrick et al., 2007; MacDonald, 2007). In the words of Cook (2005) these are the “...the hard to reach, hard to teach, most alienated, most vulnerable and those at the end of the line – for whom nothing has worked so

far” (p. 90). They include, but are not limited to, children who have been excluded from mainstream schools, children who refuse to attend mainstream school and cases where the child or their family has been in dispute with the school (Cook, 2005; DfE, 2013; Thompson & Russell, 2009; Pirrie et al., 2011). School exclusions are associated with a number of negative long-term outcomes including poverty, social exclusion, involvement in crime, poor mental and physical health, and increased substance use and abuse (e.g., Berridge *et al.*, 2001; Coles *et al.*, 2002; Daniels *et al.*, 2003; MacDonald, 2007). The personal and societal price for disrupted and problematic educational pathways is substantial.

DfE (2013) policy guidance indicates that alternative provision should be matched to the specific personal, social and academic needs of the pupils; a point reflected and supported in the research literature (e.g., Bryson, 2010; Flower et al., 2011; Pirrie et al., 2011). Furthermore, they should aim to achieve “...improved pupil motivation and self-confidence, attendance and engagement with education.” (DfE, p.10). The academic attainment of AP schools should be on par with mainstream schools and there should be clearly defined pathways into further education, training or employment. These are laudable aspirations for AP and a variety of expertise is available to draw on to facilitate such aims (e.g., Flower et al., 2011; Resechly & Christenson, 2012). However, as noted by Pirrie et al. (2011) expectations must be set against disrupted educational pathways of pupils. Gains are difficult to quantify and success might be judged in ways other than those revealed by academic attainments. Assumptions that might be taken for granted with mainstream students (e.g., travelling to school independently) could represent a substantial challenge and achievement for AP students.

### **Student engagement and the instructional climate**

We draw on the model of student engagement advanced by Resechly and Christenson (2012). This model suggests that participation or non-participation with schooling and

education reflect long-term processes of engagement and disengagement. Student engagement is the glue, or mediator, that links the school context to desirable educational outcomes such as attending school and making educational progress. It is widely accepted that engagement is a metaconstruct including affective, cognitive and behavioural dimensions (e.g., Appleton, Christenson, Kim & Reschly, 2006; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Jimerson, Campos & Gried, 2003). Affective components of engagement include positive and negative feelings about learning activities, interest and school belongingness. Cognitive components of engagement reflect the level of investment and strategies for deep thinking and critical thinking. Behavioural engagement refers to tangible and observable actions including participation, involvement, effort and persistence in lessons and classroom activities. In this respect engagement frameworks are not distinct and separate from other related theories, such as motivation and the self-regulation of learning, but rather a specific lens through which to examine affective, cognitive and behavioural forms of engagement (e.g., see Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012; Reeve, 2012).

A number of studies have identified activators and enablers of student engagement as occurring through teacher-student relationships in classrooms and instructional settings. From this social-ecological perspective, engagement is not the property of the student but embedded in the context, including in interactions and relationships with others. One of the key factors that emerge from this literature refers to the instructional climate (Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Roehrig & Christensen, 2010). The instructional climate needs to be one in which a positive atmosphere is created that is saturated with motivating and engaging instructional strategies, such as encouraging student autonomy and choice, making content interesting and appropriately challenging, and favouring depth rather than breadth of topic coverage (e.g., Dolezal et al., 2003). Such an atmosphere can enable cognitive, affective and behavioural engagement (Perry, Turner & Meyer, 2006; Lam, Pak & Ma., 2007, Lam, Wong,

Yang & Liu, 2012). This climate is characterised by a comfortable, stimulating, cooperative, effort-focused atmosphere (e.g., having a gentle and caring manner, interacting positively with students one-to-one, giving effective praise and feedback and communicating that academic tasks deserve attention) in which students are challenged and engaged by incorporating interesting, authentic tasks (Roehrig et al., 2008; Roehrig & Christensen, 2010). Student competencies should be matched with task demands (and increase in demands as students improve), student efforts monitored and scaffolding provided as needed (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre & Pianta, 2008). In addition, positive school and classroom environments promote mastery goals that focus on developing task or self competence, rather than performance goals, that focus on student comparison and competition (Dolezal et al., 2003; Gonida, Voulala & Kiosseoglou, 2009; Martin, 2005; Wang & Holcombe, 2010).

### **Theories of self-regulated learning**

Given the focus of this study on the instructional practices used to support student re-engagement we use self-regulated learning theory to offer insight into the types of mechanisms required for a student to successfully (re)engage with their learning. Theories of self-regulated learning (SRL) propose a series of cyclic mechanisms, processes and strategies that students use in order to manage learning (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012; Zimmerman, 2000, 2008; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2009). These are grouped into three main sequential phases: forethought, performance and reflection. The forethought, or planning, phase, refers to processes that occur before learning takes place. Highly self-regulated students set goals, what they would like to achieve in relation to a particular activity, task or lesson, and proactively plan the steps or learning plans that are required in order to meet or attain those goals. This is followed by a phase of activity, learning or performance (the performance phase). Highly self-regulated students are able to direct and control their attention and action to optimise task-focus, effort and persistence. Critically, they also monitor and keep track of

their progress towards their goals. After the activity phase, highly self-regulated students reflect on their learning and performance. Progress is compared to self- or externally generated criterion (e.g., learning outcomes set by the teacher at the beginning of the lesson) and reasons for progress (or success/ failure) are attributed to strategy use rather than ability. Feedback loops allow the student to make adjustments to their activity if, for instance, they perceive themselves as not on course to achieve their goals.

Self-regulation of learning has been linked to a number of engagement constructs including self-efficacy, task value and interest, enjoyment of learning (and other positive emotional experiences) and responsibility that influence the strategic choice required to sustain engagement through cycles of learning (Berger & Karabenick, 2011; Fishman, 2014; Villavicencio & Baernardo, 2013; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2008). Students who, for instance, value particular subjects, lessons, or tasks, and who believe that they are capable of undertaking the activities required in those subjects, lessons, or tasks, are more effective in their goal-setting, self-monitoring, help seeking and self-evaluating (Kitsantas, Zimmerman, & Cleary, 2000). Ultimately, these students also achieve better grades (Helle, Laakkonen, Tuijula, & Vermunt, 2013). Programmes designed to help students improve their self-regulation of learning, with the assistance of a teacher or mentor, have also shown how students can be helped to restructure their beliefs to focus on the choice and evaluation of learning strategy, which results in improved grades (Cleary, Patten, & Nelson, 2008; Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004, 2006).

### **Engagement and AP**

The literature has indicated that student engagement is sensitive to and enabled by the school context and particularly what happens in the classroom; various practices have been identified that enable and facilitate engagement. However, this literature is largely conducted on samples of students who are, to a greater or lesser extent, still engaged with learning and



their education. During our literature search examples of studies which had taken as their starting point students who had already disengaged, or were further towards a disrupted educational pathway, were scarce (e.g., Jones, 2009). The limited literature has suggested that high quality classroom contexts may be particularly salient and serve as protective resources within the academic environment for students at risk of disengagement (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Lohmann, 2010; Pianta, Steinberg & Rollins, 1995, but see Park et al., 2012). Fulton (2007) conducted interviews with 10 students, and eight of their parents, who had disengaged with mainstream high school but later graduated from an alternative high school. Aspects of the school and classroom environment not cited as frequently in the mainstream school literature were reported to contribute to engagement, for example, the structure of the day, individualised instruction and class size. Theoretically speaking, there is a need for research to determine whether those practices identified as enablers of engagement largely on the basis of studies of engaged students will also function as enablers of engagement in disengaged students, as well as to establish those factors idiosyncratic to students who have already disengaged.

### **Aim of the present study**

The aim of this study was to examine those instructional practices used, in an AP context, with students who had been previously disconnected from their education. From a practical and applied perspective it is important to identify those practices that may be beneficial in facilitating and enabling re-engagement in students who have previously disconnected or disengaged from their education. Substantively speaking it is important to consider the fit of models and frameworks that are derived from engagement in mainstream education to the AP context. We examine this aim in a study conducted in one of the new AP free schools in England opened since 2010 following the Academic Act. Our research questions focused on the instructional practices used in the classroom: What instructional

practices were used? How were practices adapted or adjusted to the needs of the students? What were staff and students perceptions of instructional enablers and obstructions of (re)engagement? We used interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to guide our data collection and analyses. Substantive theory regarding student engagement were used to inform observational and interview schedules but analyses proceeded in a data-driven fashion.

### **Method**

Data were collected during a month-long fieldwork visit in the mid-point of the academic year. The school opened in September 2012, and our fieldwork visit was scheduled in the second year since opening. Although we describe the school in singular terms, educational provision was spread across three sites (used for a variety of other purposes) that comprised of two classrooms, office space, student recreational spaces and other facilities (e.g., sports facilities). Our fieldwork visits included a minimum of one week spent at each site. The use of different sites was a response to rapid expansion during the first year of the school. At the time of data collection the school contained 46 students enrolled for on-site provision and a further 16 students enrolled for a mixture of on and off-site provision. We collected three types of data: Classroom observation, interviews with students and interviews with staff. Our goal for data collection was to try and ensure, during the period of our visit, as comprehensive a coverage as possible of lessons, students and staff.

Semi-structured classroom observations were conducted using an adapted version of the schedule developed by Roehrig and Christensen (2010) for identifying classroom factors designed to facilitate student engagement. Classroom activity was recorded under four categories: Atmosphere, motivating instruction, management and student engagement. Atmosphere refers to what the teacher does to the physical and interpersonal environment to get and keep students involved in learning, motivating instruction to how well lesson

activities and instructional style motivate students, management to the order, rules, routines, and procedures used to support learning and student engagement to the participation of students in lesson activities. Atmosphere, motivating instruction and management include a number of subcategories. They are described, along with examples, in the appendix. Although an a priori coding schedule was used, we did not attempt to collect reliable frequency counts of the various categories observed that is typical of highly structured observations (Walshe, Gail & Grithiffs, 2011). Our research questions were not focused on the number of occasions particular strategies were used. Rather our focus was on revealing the strategies that were used (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011; Cotton, Stokes & Cotton, 2011) and examples of the various strategies used on the schedule were collected as a series of fieldnotes.

Twenty-nine hours of lessons were observed in the following lessons: English, mathematics, science, physical education (PE) and media studies. The median staff-to-student ratio in the lessons we observed was 2:5. The staff present in the lesson consisted of the classroom teacher and either a student teacher and/ or a classroom learning support assistant. The school operated a reduced academic curriculum. All students followed the statutory General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) programme of study in English, mathematics and science. Furthermore, PE was compulsory for on-site enrolled students as a vocational qualification (the Business and Technology Education Council). We focused our lesson observations primarily on these subjects. Students could also choose to follow a subject of their choice for one full school day per week. These included academic (GCSE Art or Media Studies) as well as vocational subjects (e.g., Health and Beauty, Construction).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 35 students (23 male and 12 female). These were predominantly students enrolled in on-site provision. Students were all aged 14–16 years and were in Years 10 and 11; the final two years of secondary education in England.

Students had diverse educational histories and backgrounds. Prior to enrolling at the AP school some students had attended a mainstream secondary school while others had already been enrolled in a more established form of local authority supported AP (i.e., a pupil referral unit; PRU). Almost all students had either been excluded from their mainstream secondary school, or a PRU, or had refused to attend. Most had very poor records of attendance at their previous school, or PRU, (typically 10–20%) and some had extended periods of absenteeism. Students could transfer to the AP school at any point in Years 10 and 11. Although this project did not extend to considering the family or community backgrounds of students, these were typically described by staff as ‘challenging’ and included issues such as homelessness, parental substance addiction, abuse, gang culture and violence.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with 37 members of staff (23 male and 14 female). The roles of staff interviewees included classroom teachers, student teachers on placement from a higher education institution, administrators, behaviour and welfare officers, therapeutic engagement workers and those with school management responsibilities. All of the staff were employed directly by the school with the exception of the student teachers and the therapeutic engagement workers who, although they were primarily based at the school, were contracted from a local charitable trust. Interviewees included all staff with classroom teaching responsibilities (20 in total).

The interview schedules for students and staff were based on factors presented in Reschly and Christenson’s (2012) model of student engagement. The student version of the schedule included questions about the relational climate, affective engagement (belongingness, identification with and enjoyment of school), cognitive engagement (value of education, academic credentials and post-secondary aspirations), behavioural engagement (attendance, class participation and task focus) and the need for autonomy. The interview schedule for staff included questions about the following: Creating the school/ learning

environment and relational climate, creating and showing commitment and care, fair discipline policies and approach to discipline and authority, approach to teaching and learning, approach to curriculum planning, following/ tracking students after leaving, and professional development for working with disengaged students. We followed the approach advocated in Brinkmann and Kvale (2014) of using a build-up phase to establish rapport with the interviewee, followed by the main schedule of questions, and a cool-down phase to conclude the interview. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data were coded along the principles of IPA (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The purpose of IPA is to understand how people construct and make sense of their experience(s) by exploring their perceptions or accounts of events or states. . Analysis proceeds in a bottom-up fashion to build themes from the data rather than to code data according to the structures and precepts of educational theories of engagement. The initial coding stage was undertaken by each author separately who then compared and interrogated the emerging themes against the text to identify and resolve disconfirmatory cases. Consistent with the principles of IPA, data from classroom observations, student interviews and staff interviews were analysed separately in order to preserve any differences that might have emerged between them. Once resolved, initial themes from classroom observations and staff and student interviews were grouped in a hierarchical fashion into higher-level clusters by the first author and again scrutinised by all authors. Once discordant codes were identified and resolved, and the relationship between initial codes and high-level clusters established, four super-ordinate themes were identified by the first author to identify and represent the shared phenomenological experiences of the staff and students at the school in relation to the instructional practices used. Again, these were checked by all authors. IPA was chosen as the most appropriate analytic technique due to the shared experience of interviewees as members

of a school community, the priority given over to participants' accounts and the applicability to observational as well as interview data (Smith et al., 2009).

Following the analyses, member checks were conducted on two separate occasions. A document containing complete analyses of classroom observations and staff interviews was initially reviewed by a six-panel committee comprising of school managers and teaching staff and subsequently reviewed by at a meeting held with all teaching and lesson support staff, in which other staff were invited to comment. No substantial interpretive differences arose at these meetings. However, we were requested to remove a small number of individual student quotations that were identified as not being representative of the student voice or experience. It is acknowledged that the behaviour and emotional stability of students attending the school could fluctuate rapidly within as well as between days and interviews may have coincided with a student in a volatile period. We deferred to the professional expertise of teachers and complied with their requests. Although no follow-up interviews were conducted with the same staff or students, the extended period of fieldwork allowed us to discuss approaches to classroom instruction and particular events with teachers as a way of 'testing' our analytic interpretations with participants in the interview themes above.

### **Findings and Discussion**

We begin our discussion of findings with a description of a typical lesson, from those that were observed, as it frames our conceptualisation of the instructional practices used at the school to support student (re)engagement. The typical lesson was characterised by a high degree of individualised learning, a high degree of instructional interaction between students and the teacher, or lesson support staff<sup>1</sup>, and a high degree of student support. Most, but not all students, would sustain on-task behaviours for a limited period of time only (typically 5–

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term 'lesson support staff' to refer to any adult present in the classroom who was working, under the guidance of the teacher, to support student learning rather than as a person's job title. Lesson support staff may have been a qualified teacher, a trainee teacher or a school manager. This allows us to differentiate the role being fulfilled during the class from that person's job title.

10 minutes, but sometimes longer). This presented a significant challenge for teachers in terms of lesson planning and management and for students in terms of learning and progress. Several factors, described in greater detail below, contributed to students' difficulty in maintaining on-task focus. These included a chronic lack of confidence and self-belief in their capacity to learn, an inability to break down a larger activity into a series of small tasks, a lack of persistence to overcome challenging tasks (which itself is underpinned by a lack of self-belief) and fear that making an effort might result in failure. The following quotation describes a teacher's view of a typical lesson.

They [students] need very, very, structured lessons where they are told 'you will do this' and 'you do that' so I find engagement takes a lot more planning. To engage [the students] we can't just come in and go 'discuss this' and then we will go from there. It has to be 'you must do this' and 'you must do that' because if you get your lesson plan wrong it's a long way back. I mean once they've gone, to rein them back in. (Female Teacher)

Students would lose task-focus when either they became stuck on a task, distracted by another member of the class or were unable to sustain concentration. If stuck on a task, students were unable to re-focus themselves without support. Students lacked the confidence or persistence to continue, were unable to plan the steps required to overcome the problem they had encountered and, on occasions, seemed overwhelmed by the frustration of not being able to continue. If students did not receive immediate support from the teacher or lesson support staff, they became disruptive by distracting other classmates or, if particularly frustrated, leaving the class, refusing to work or engaging in more uncivil behaviours. Once students were unable to sustain concentration or were distracted by a classmate, they might stop for a few minutes and engage in conversation with their classmates or the teacher (sometimes about the task, sometimes unrelated) and then return to their task. We subsequently draw on theories of SRL to frame our analyses of observation and interview data.

**SRL and the approach to teaching**

School staff understood that students' limitations, capabilities and educational histories were a major obstacle to being able to plan the steps required to progress towards a learning goal (a key part of the planning, or forethought, stage of SRL).. In order to allow students unable to sustain task-focus to make progress, teachers and lesson support staff provided the structure necessary to underpin learning. This was primarily achieved in two ways. The first was to individualise learning as much as possible (this is a theme taken up in more detail below) and the second was to break down lessons, activities and tasks into small chunks that the students could understand and to help them to progress by linking the chunks together. Even where a task might span several lessons (e.g., writing a leaflet for English GCSE coursework) these were broken down into smaller more manageable chunks.

There was an explicit acknowledgement from staff that it was important not to replicate approaches used in mainstream education. Such approaches, referred to by one teacher as 'old fashioned', relied on teacher-lead instruction and tasks that required students to direct and regulate their own task progress. From this perspective one reason why students were unable to succeed in mainstream education was that approaches to teaching were designed for large whole class teaching. This approach was not suited to learners unable to regulate their learning and mainstream schools do not have the resources (financial, staffing and time) to be able to provide the level of support required to support this type of learner. Many students described how, in their previous educational institutions, they would become frustrated or bored. This would lead to disruptive behaviour, followed by an escalating series of punitive measures resulting in temporary and eventual permanent exclusion.

Perhaps it is not surprising that, given the disrupted educational histories of the students we interviewed, many did not find it easy to re-engage with their learning (see the quotation below). Teachers described a process whereby they had to judge how much to 'press'



students during a lesson when they were being avoidant, resistant and disruptive. This was a difficult balance for teachers to achieve. Teachers did not accept students' attempts to resist and avoid engaging with their lessons. However if students were 'pushed' too hard they could become confrontational.

They [some students] will try and put as many barriers in the way, excuses in the way, of them actually doing some work as they possibly can. It would be nice if they could think, put the energy into thinking, into actually doing their work, instead of them putting their energy into how can I look at ways of avoiding doing it. (Male Teacher)

Adopting this approach helped students to internalise the value of learning and education. If an approach to teaching and learning was adopted that assumed that students were capable of SRL, which seemed to be the case in mainstream/ traditional secondary education, then students would not progress and be deemed a failure. Adopting an approach that underpinned students' learning enabled them to progress and achieve and allowed students to invest value in their learning. Internalising the value of learning and education is an important element in the planning phase of theories of SRL by providing the impetus to want to work towards particular learning goals. Lessons, tasks or activities could be valued because they are seen as interesting, because achievement is important or because they are instrumental in helping to reach one's goals (Eccles, 2005, 2007; Eccles, O'Neill, & Wigfield, 2005; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). The following quotation is indicative of the changed attitude towards their learning described by the students we interviewed.

I actually want to make the effort here. Because I screwed up in my last school, just because I didn't get on with a few teachers, and just because I couldn't be bothered, but I'm getting my head down now. (Female Student)

Three elements of the lesson process will be explored in greater detail in relation to SRL: individualised learning, staff-to-student ratio and instructional dialogue.

### **Individualised learning**

Lessons in the core academic curriculum (maths, English, science and P.E.) were organised around a mixture of whole class teaching and students working on individualised tasks (e.g., English coursework or practice maths GCSE questions). Sections of lessons with whole class teaching tended to move at a faster pace. This provided less opportunity for students to lose task-focus but some students expressed concern during lessons that they were struggling to keep up with the pace of the work. This seemed to show students' levels of care and commitment to their learning. Whole class teaching presented particular challenges as it requires all students to be focusing and maintaining their attention on the teacher simultaneously. Notably control and focus of attention are considered core elements of the performance phase of SRL (Wolters, 2003; Zimmerman, 2000). Sections of lessons with individualised work allowed students to work at their own pace and receive individualised feedback from the teacher or lesson support staff. Students, for example, would be set an individual challenge, that might take 5 or 10 minutes to complete, receive feedback and then be set a new challenge. These could be likened to mini-lessons or activities within a larger lesson or activity. In lessons where students were not able to focus attention for sections of whole class teaching, more progress seemed to be made during these sections of individualised learning.

Sometimes feedback was initiated by the teacher or lesson support staff to provide the student with individual informative feedback by using question and answer to establish quickly what the student had achieved, task progress and scaffold learning by using questions to prompt where the student needed to go next. Although this approach was very intense and students were given a high degree of support, there was never a sense that students were 'given' answers. Students were always prompted and supported to try and work out answers, make decisions and set goals for themselves. In theories of SRL the type of on-task feedback described here can be seen as supporting the processes used to track progress in students not

experienced in self-monitoring (Graham & Harris, 2005). Feedback loops from the performance to the planning phase can help to strengthen learning goals, beliefs and values (Zimmerman, 2000) and from this perspective the density and regularity of feedback helps to strengthen the link. Sometimes interactions would be student initiated and the student would ask the teacher or lesson support staff for help. As the quotation below indicates, many of the staff we interviewed had identified low confidence as an importance factor in this process.

Students need constant reassurance that what they are doing is correct so they know what to do next because they do forget and even with a simple sheet of instructions. They do appreciate the fact that the somebody that keep on track and it became obvious to me then that one-to-one support is essential. (Male Teacher)

Confidence, or self-efficacy, is seen as one of the foremost drivers of motivation and engagement (Bandura, 1997). Without the knowledge or understanding of the steps required to reach a learning goal, or how to plan those steps, student progress towards learning goals would be haphazard (Schunck, 1982; Schunck & Pajares, 2004). Teachers would encourage students to 'just try', and not to fear failure, for tasks that were unusual or challenging and would make comments such as 'You'll be amazed at what you can do when you just try' and 'I bet you have given up before and now you can do it for yourself'. Encouraging messages are considered one of the four sources of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and the power of these messages are captured in the quotation below. In one English lesson, one of the lesson support staff read out, with the student's permission, a piece of creative writing that the student had been working on. The whole class were captivated (they listened attentively and there was no disruption) and gave the student a round of applause. It seemed to be used not only as a tool for encouraging the student who had written the piece, but also as a way of modelling to other students a sense of self-belief; breaking the 'I can't do this' way of thinking. Vicarious experience is considered another source of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

...most of the teachers have said when I leave this school I will be so successful... all the staff, teachers, learning mentors they are so supportive and they just wanna, they just wanna see you do the best that you can and they just wanna see you, erm, just doing your best really and going on to achieve something big. (Male Student)

### **Staff-to-student ratio (SSR) in lessons**

The SSR was critical to the success of this individualised approach. It allowed students to receive individual support and feedback quickly as teacher and lesson support staff only had to divide their attention between a relatively small number of students. This seemed important to lesson flow as students tended to stop working when stuck rather than persevere (another indication of low SRL). If the teacher or lesson support staff was immediately at hand to support learning then students could access support immediately when they became stuck. They did not have to wait for the teacher or lesson support staff to finish working with another student first. Lessons with a lower SSR not only tended to result in more on-task behaviour and greater student progress but also less disruption. The quotation below describes the importance of SSR.

I have never been anywhere [any other school] where it requires this much attention every minute, every second. Every minute of every day you always have to have an eye on the kids or have at least one eye on the kids and at least a couple of people in the [class] room. You can get away with managing 30 kids in a mainstream school on your own. You couldn't possibly manage more than 10 in here. You could do it but it would be an awful lesson because you wouldn't get through anything. You would spend your entire time trying to just keep them in their seat. Their attention spans are awful and whenever they have trouble with the question there's a very quick mentality to give up immediately 'No I can't do this, I am never going to be able to do this' instead of, you know, other kids will try it a few times in a mainstream school and go 'OK I get it now' whereas these [students] if they don't get it straight away they will just quit. So that's why it's very important to have someone available for every two or three maybe three or four kids because you always have someone around here they go 'No wait, I will help you'. (Female Teacher)

The SSRs and implementation of lesson support was a source of dissatisfaction and tension for staff where lesson support was not always implemented as intended, resulting in higher SSRs. Many staff had multiple roles within the school. For instance, some teachers also had child welfare and safeguarding responsibilities. One of the ways that multiple staff roles impacted negatively on lesson SSRs was when staff, timetabled to provide lesson support, were not able to do so because one of their other roles took priority at that particular time (requiring an immediate and urgent response). This situation created dissatisfaction for staff unable to provide the support they were timetabled to provide and tension for staff teaching the lesson without the intended level of support.

### **Use of instructional dialogue**

Lessons were characterised by a high level of instructional dialogue between the teacher (and lesson support staff) and students. Some, but not all lessons, started with an explicit learning-focused message ‘Your learning, your progress, and it will be nothing but the best’. In other lessons the message was presented more informally. These were often accompanied by more ad-hoc messages. In one class we observed, the teacher told the class ‘When I come into school I think it’s a good day when the students learn’. These messages clearly communicate the purpose of the lesson, the teacher’s intention and expectations of students and, in SRL terms, the general goals of the lesson.

Teachers used lots of explanation to help students understand the purpose of lessons and tasks and what students would be learning about. These would be presented at the beginning of a lesson (or task) and frequently repeated. They were often accompanied with expectations about behaviour and the amount of progress that should be made within a particular time frame (e.g., ‘This should take you 20 minutes’). Presenting lesson (or task) goals, repetition of goals and time management were all ways of providing structure for the

performance phase of SRL. These types of prompts would be particularly helpful for students who were not experienced in monitoring or tracking progress towards a learning goal.

Teacher-prompted question and answer was frequently used to prompt student participation, scaffold learning and was followed with immediate, informative, feedback. As we noted earlier, these are important ways of strengthening loops from the performance to the planning phases of learning (see Zimmerman, 2000). Sometimes this was integrated with whole class teaching and sometimes with students' individual work. Students were eager and enthusiastic in their answers and, in the lessons we observed, there no instances of 'awkward silences'. Question and answer was often used to prompt deeper or more critical thinking with 'how' and 'why' types of questions (e.g., 'That's a really good answer that. Why did you say eleven?'). Sometimes question and answer was used in a purely instructional or demonstrative way (such as writing to a word limit or heuristics to solve maths problems) but also through narrative. In an English lesson one of the lesson support staff gave an impromptu talk to the whole class mid-lesson (seemingly spontaneous that arose from a discussion with a student) about the value and importance of imagination using himself as a role model and his own younger school experience (see the point about vicarious influence on self-efficacy above).

Students were often quick to communicate to the teacher when they found something difficult, challenging or boring. Sometimes these were expressed in deafest ways by the student (e.g. 'Oh Miss, I'm not doing this') but within the lesson context acted as an enabler of participation by alerting the teacher (or lesson support staff) to provide some individual help or support to the student. Sometimes the students would simply ask for help in a more plain fashion (e.g., 'Can I have some support please?'). The two quotations below attest to the quick responses of teachers and lesson support staff.

Any time you need the teacher they are just right there. (Female Student)

As soon as you put your hand up in your lesson they [teachers or lesson support staff] are like straight over, like, 'What can I help you with?' (Male Student)

On-task prompts were frequently and proactively used by teachers (and lesson support staff) through lessons. Language was encouraging, supportive and non-confrontational, and seemed designed to focus on the positive aspects of participation by supporting SRL. Prompts such as 'Where did you get up to yesterday?' and 'Where do you need to go next?' focus on lesson and task goals. Prompts such as 'You've got 10 minutes to do the task, look at the time now' focus on time management and task-monitoring. Prompts such as 'Take your time and try and work it out', 'Come on lads, keep working hard at it' and 'Have you done as much as you can do?' appealed to persistence and effort.

In some lessons for core subjects (maths, English and science) learning goals or outcomes were explicitly linked to GCSE grades. The teacher would explain how answers to questions would be marked in a GCSE exam? and how higher marks could be gained with more sophisticated answers. This kind of approach was sometimes, but not always, done in conjunction with practice exam questions. Sometimes these were used in whole class teaching and sometimes as part of individualised learning during a lesson. With either approach, feedback was differentiated and made specific for each student in the class according to their target grade. For instance, one student was told 'You need to work at a higher level because you'll be entered for a higher paper'. There were also posters in some classrooms with headings like 'How can I move from a grade D to a C?' and 'How can I move from a grade C and grade B?'

It was notable that even when the specific focus on GCSE outcome was included in the lesson it was not to the detriment of learning, development or mastery. The lesson context was still about improving understanding, self-improvement and task improvement. The achievement focus was integrated with learning, development and mastery rather than as an alternative to these. Practices that fostered competition or prompted students to compare their

progress against others could be harmful to learning. The focus could become showing, rather than developing, competence (Elliot, 2005; Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Murayama, 2008). For students who lacked confidence in their ability, it could create another barrier (Middleton & Midgley, 1997). Indeed one teacher reported how they would sometimes try and foster some ‘friendly’ competition between students as a motivational tactic but that its success was variable.

We only witnessed two instances when competition or comparison was promoted. Once, where a class was informed that they were ‘ahead’ of another class, and a second where, at the students’ request, test scores were read out to the whole class. Although these instances were infrequent and might seem fairly small and innocuous they convey a sense to students that their progress is judged against one another, not against their personal targets (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003). As we noted above, this can be damaging for students who lack self-confidence and so in general these types of practices should be avoided.

### **Conclusion**

The analyses presented here are both reassuring and encouraging. Before attending this AP school, the students we interviewed had been disconnected and disengaged from education; for some students this had been for an extended period of time. However at this AP school, students were able to re-engage with their schooling in a supportive atmosphere and work towards qualifications (GCSEs) where minimum pass grades are required, in England, for entry into post-compulsory education and training, and the labour market (Onion, 2004; Roberts, 2004). A more upward life trajectory seemed possible than if students had remained disconnected from their secondary education. Our analysis was generally supportive of socio-ecological perspectives suggesting that student engagement is sensitive to the school context and the instructional climate in particular (e.g., Reschly & Christenson,



2012). Furthermore, we confirm findings from the limited AP literature that a small class size and individualised learning can help to provide elements of the instructional climate required to re-engage those students in education that had been previously deemed as disengaged (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Fulton, 2007; Lohmann, 2010; Pianta et al., 1995).

Our analysis also provides insights into the particular instructional practices that proved successful at this school and with this group of students. These included: (i) breaking down tasks and activities into smaller units, (ii) using lots of on-task prompts, (iii) encouragement of self-belief, (iv) stating the worth and importance of education, in general, and of specific lessons, (v) using lots of feedback and on-task scaffolding and (vi), providing help to students quickly. Theories of SRL (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2012; Zimmerman, 2000, 2008; Zimmerman & Cleary, 2009) were used as a theoretical resource. Students, in the main, were unable to plan, monitor and make adjustments, where necessary, to reach learning goals and the instructional strategies listed above were conceptualised as allowing students with low SRL to make progress that, in turn, helps students develop their capacity for SRL.

Although it was not specifically our intention to draw comparisons between the AP school and students' previous educational institutions, it was notable that both staff and students highlighted these instructional tactics as ones that were absent in the students' previous schools. These were not solely mainstream secondary schools and may also have included existing forms of AP such as PRUs. Nor is this point intended as a criticism of mainstream schooling. As we highlighted above, the approach used in the AP school was resource heavy and mainstream schools simply do not have the resources to provide this level of support. The AP school does appear, therefore, to be fulfilling the requirement to provide an education for students who for various reasons had been excluded from, or refused to attend, their previous school. It does, however, mark out a contrast between this AP school and PRUs that, on the basis of perceptions of staff and students at this school, would suggest

that PRUs adopt a similar instructional approach to that used in mainstream and was not successful at re-engaging students.

We would conclude, therefore, that at least one of the successful elements of the AP school that allowed students to re-engage was this supportive instructional environment that provided the structure to support students in regulating their learning. However, there were also many other elements of the school that contributed to and supported student re-engagement that we have not had the space to describe and analyse here that also mark out the alternativeness; notably the non-punitive approach to discipline, the high-priority given to developing and maintaining trusting and caring relationships with students and the attention to basic needs of students that may not have been met through the home environment (e.g., hygiene, sleep and nutrition). Thus, our findings must be taken as one element that contributed to the re-engagement of students rather than the only element or one that should be prioritised above others.

In summary, there is little known about the new types of AP free schools that are opening in England and the findings we present here shed a little light on the instructional practices used at one such school. Using SRL as a theoretical resource we have highlighted factors that supported the instructional practices that contributed to the re-engagement and development of students.

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## Appendix.

*Categories used in the semi-structured observational schedule (adapted from Roehrig and Christensen, 2010)*

*Atmosphere*

Fostering a sense of community	Teacher expresses empathy for students and encourages others to do so as well There is positive one-on-one teacher-student interaction
Fostering a sense of interest	Teacher is enthusiastic, builds anticipation and encourages curiosity
Focus on effort rather than performance	Teacher attributes success to effort, strategies and time Teacher urges students to try hard, encouraging persistence
Establishing a democratic classroom	No students are allowed to feel left out Use of language ('we', 'our', etc.) to promote community and ownership
High expectations expressed	Teacher expresses confidence in students Teacher communicates to students that they can and will learn
Informative feedback provided	Teacher provides feedback that is informative and does not give unspecific praise Teacher cues students' attention particularly to the positive and partially correct Teacher does NOT emphasise differences between students in performance

*Motivating Instruction*

Using engaging content and activities	Teacher reviews previous content to relate it to new content Teacher frequently incorporates student questions/ ideas into class conversations
Achieving high instructional density	Teacher provides opportunistic mini-lessons at teachable moments The classroom is busy, with a high density of instruction apparent
Achieving appropriate challenge level	Teacher asks questions at a difficulty level that ensures a number of bidders Instructional pacing is not so slow that students are bored or go off task
Thinking processes modelled and taught	Teacher explicitly articulates the processes used in strategies/problem solving Teacher encourages use of higher order thinking skills

*Management*

Encouraging behavioural self-regulation	Teacher effectively uses redirection to help keep students on-task Teacher establishes procedural routines that students have learnt Opportunities to choose topic/activities of interest
Providing behaviour/ task monitoring	Teacher does whole class monitoring for on-task behaviour Teacher does not use punishment to keep students on task
Student Engagement	Students are consistently on task and highly engaged in activities Students vocalize/express excitement about content/activities