

## Evaluation of Learning Away

### Hypothesis 3: Student engagement

Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education  
(*CUREE*)

4 Copthall House,  
Station Square  
Coventry CV1 2FL

☎ +44 (024) 7652 4036

☎ +44 (024) 7663 1646

✉ info@curee.co.uk

This report should be cited as: CUREE (2012) *Evaluation of Learning Away: Hypothesis 3: Student engagement*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

### **Hypothesis 3: Student engagement**

*High quality residential learning programmes can significantly improve students' engagement with their learning and this can:*

- *be achieved for students who are compliant in school, but do not feel high levels of ownership and responsibility for their own learning*
- *be achieved for students seen as most disengaged*
- *lead to improved school attendance and behaviour, and*
- *be sustained beyond the residential to lead to improved achievement for students in the longer term.*

#### **Background**

Student engagement is variously defined in the research literature. According to one study, students are engaged 'when they are involved in their work, persist despite challenges and obstacles, and take visible delight in accomplishing their work'<sup>1</sup>. According to another study, student engagement also refers to a student's 'willingness, need, desire and compulsion to participate in, and be successful in, the learning process promoting higher level thinking for enduring understanding'<sup>2</sup>.

A further study describes students who are engaged as showing 'sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by a positive emotional tone. They select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest'<sup>3</sup>.

The opposite of engagement is disaffection. 'Disaffected [students] are passive, do not try hard, and give up easily in the face of challenges... [they can] be bored, depressed, anxious, or even angry about their presence in the classroom; they can be withdrawn from learning opportunities or even rebellious towards teachers and classmates'<sup>4</sup>. Disengagement is defined as students 'withdrawing from school in any significant way'<sup>5</sup>.

#### **Programme wide outcomes related to engagement**

All clusters reported consistently good levels of student engagement during residential. Apart from visibly enjoying participating in the residential activities, clusters commented on the students' positive attitude towards practical difficulties and physical challenges, their effort and 'outstanding' behaviour. In many cases, clusters emphasised that the levels of engagement in, and enjoyment of learning, were higher than that at school:

---

<sup>1</sup> Schlechty, P. (1994). *Increasing Student Engagement*. Missouri Leadership Academy. p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Bomia, L., Beluzo, L., Demeester, D., Elander, K., Johnson, M., & Sheldon, B. (1997). *The impact of teaching strategies on intrinsic motivation*. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. p. 294.

<sup>3</sup> Skinner, E.A., & Belmont, M.J. (1993). "Motivation in the classroom: Reciprocal effects of teacher behavior and student engagement across the school year." *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 85(4). p. 572

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> Willms, J.D. (2003) *Student Engagement at School: a sense of belonging and participation: Results from PISA 2000*. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. p. i.

*'The students found learning in context and being outdoors more exciting than learning in the classroom.'* (Christchurch case study)

### *Deep engagement*

Several clusters noted signs of deep student engagement, including students asking searching questions or looking for answers themselves, eager to improve their understanding. Most clusters noted improvements in the extent to which all students made contributions during group work activities and the extent to which students listened and responded to other's suggestions:

*'They worked better as a team and seemed to listen to each other and be more enthusiastic...even the quieter ones of the group were joining the discussion'.* (Staff member, Newall Green)

*'The dynamics of the class changed. The children who always took front stage at school were outshone by others who had really good ideas'.* (Staff member, Thomas Tallis)

### *The engagement of disaffected students and students with challenging behaviour*

In a number of cases, staff were surprised to see that young people who were disaffected in school were engaged during the residential:

*'One of our boys who has behaviour difficulties was thoroughly engrossed in the day. He related extremely well with the other children and listened intently to the staff'.* (Member of staff, Walney cluster).

*'Children with challenging behaviour also enjoyed the experience and exhibited less anti-social behaviour than normal while on the residential. This continued after returning to school because the curriculum module made more sense and was taught in a different way from the approaches that they had previously experienced'.* (East EAZ cluster)

Hanover cluster staff commented on the change in behaviour of a child with ADHD who was sometimes difficult to teach in the classroom. During the residential, teachers *'hardly noticed him'* which they meant in a good way. They later used similar teaching strategies to those they had used during the residential to improve his engagement with learning in the classroom.

Canterbury cluster specifically designed its *Making the Learning Real* residential programme to re-engage disengaged and disaffected young people. The programme aimed to initiate and strengthen learner engagement and advance student learning by bringing the curriculum to life and improving relationships with staff and peers. For some students, with a genuine interest in, for example, public services, hospitality or catering, the residentials provided an opportunity for practical and experiential learning and applying their skills. The ultimate aim was to reignite

students' interest in learning and improve their attitude to school.

When on their residential in Snowdonia, the students all took part in mountain and water-based outdoor activities leading to two different qualifications – ASDAN and BTEC. For instance, the learning objectives for Unit 6 of the Public Services BTEC course, *Adventurous Activities*, which directly mapped onto many of the residential activities, included:

- being able to participate in outdoor pursuits and teamwork;
- understanding the benefits of outdoor pursuit residentials and responsibilities of the organisers;
- knowing about youth and community projects in the society and their use of outdoor activities, etc.

Student assignments completed as part of this course involved them in capturing photos of their own involvement in outdoor activities to support and extend their reflections on issues such as:

- learning new skills;
- using teamwork and communication;
- benefits of activity to individuals and groups; and
- use of adventurous activities within youth and community projects.

At the same time, an opportunity to work with new people (instructors for specific activities), enabled the students to develop the skills and knowledge, specified by Unit 2 of the BTEC Public services qualification, particularly in relation to understanding various methods of instruction and being able to use a range of interpersonal communication skills.

Several members of staff noticed that they had a lot fewer, if at all, incidents with student behaviour during the residentials, than they would at school. Teachers were frequently amazed at how well-behaved the students were, often without staff making any effort to secure it. One teacher commented that the students behaved sensibly 'like adults', which she attributed to the informal atmosphere and staff treating the young people like equals. Examples of this included students being allowed to call members of staff by their first names and staff learning new skills, such as rock climbing, alongside students.

#### *Evidence of engagement sustained back at school*

Long term changes in students' engagement with learning were highlighted by several clusters. For example, one of the students attending Samuel Whitbread School had initially resisted his parents' attempts to persuade him to learn Spanish, but became an enthusiastic convert after the *Spanish immersion school* residential programme. Staff from the Hanover cluster noticed how removing the pressure to succeed academically during the residential helped one high achieving child to try new things and approach learning more positively after the residential. South Hetton cluster commented on how children were motivated to research and write things at home and bring them back into school to show others following the residential. But although several clusters noted improved

engagement following residential in terms of attitude to learning in school and interest in pursuing topics at home, none appeared to collect data related to its impact on attendance in school.

### *Improved achievement*

Canterbury cluster specifically targeted one of its residential programmes *Making the Learning Real* at disengaged and disaffected young people. The residential were part of an alternative curriculum programme which led to vocational and other qualifications, such as ASDAN's Level 2 Certificate of Personal Effectiveness and BTEC First diploma in Public Services. The cluster noted that the numbers of students, particularly lower ability learners, achieving vocational qualifications in courses which included elements of residential learning were much higher for the modules (units 2 and 6) that included outdoor and residential learning. For example, the pass rate for unit 2 (skills) and unit 6 (adventurous activities) of the Public Services BTEC (Level 2, GCSE equivalent) was 95%. The pass rates for the other units ranged from 60% for unit 4 (citizenship) to 75% for unit 3 (fitness) and unit 1 (introduction to public services).

Similarly, a Newall Green student who had previously been disengaged from learning, and who could be easily distracted and display challenging behaviour, showed a keen interest and natural flair for hospitality and catering whilst on the residential, and expressed a desire to become a chef on leaving the school. The social and family support workers helped to identify an appropriate qualification for the youngster who subsequently successfully completed a Level 2 Award in Food Safety in Catering, achieving an amazing 100% result, *'higher than some of the [school] catering staff!'*

### **Common features in the clusters' approaches to securing engagement**

Minnett *et al.* (2008) proposed a simple formula for student engagement: Powerful pedagogy + trusting relationships = student engagement.<sup>6</sup> This formula is evident in the data supplied by the clusters about their residential.

### *Powerful pedagogy*

Whilst on the residential, the teachers typically used student-centred strategies which promoted students' active engagement. First of all, teachers actively involved the students in planning and making decisions related to the residential. Doing this enabled the teachers to make learning relevant to their students (i.e. personalised their learning). Student involvement ranged from making decisions about the activities they would like to take part through to shaping the entire programme. Walney cluster for example, involved two students from each of the participating schools in cross partnership meetings, where they contributed to identifying skills they believed were essential for successful transition, planning activities to realise such skills and developing ways of recognising them. Students were involved throughout the process and had a strong voice in determining the issues they felt should be addressed. These co-construction groups then created PowerPoint presentations and co-coached each other to prepare other students and staff back in school for the residential. One teacher explained how the co-construction experience *'had a huge impact on the students' engagement with their own learning'* because it increased their ownership over their

---

<sup>6</sup> Minnett, A. Murphy, M. Nobles, S. Taylor, T. (2008) Tools of Engagement: Sharing Evidence of Student Engagement Sparks Changes in Teacher Practice Journal of Staff Development 29 (4) pp. 25-30

learning, while one of the students commented how they were 'proud' of the residential because they had helped to co-construct it.

Secondly, the teachers provided appropriately challenging and practical, problem-solving activities that required students' active participation, frequently with the support of their peers. For example, working in groups, the Christ Church students had to find a way of transporting 10 marbles from a tray to a beaker at the other side of the room without touching them with their hands or dropping them. Once the teachers had explained the task, they stepped back and encouraged the students to solve the problem themselves. Children from the Burley cluster explained that being in groups '*made it easier to learn and understand because they could help each other*'. They discovered that a group works effectively because everyone brings different skills and knowledge.

Some clusters worked hard to develop their students' group working skills in order to ensure they worked effectively together. At Newall Green, the family worker allowed students to start off discussing the group work task by themselves, but stepped in when the students started talking over each other or were not contributing. It is interesting to note that these interventions tended to be near the beginning of the activity and that after these had occurred, the group seemed to work together more collaboratively. The discussion seemed to follow a rhythm of some individuals dominating and some disengaging, followed by teacher intervention and then a more settled discussion with contributions from all students.

Sometimes teachers designed group work activities specifically to ensure students listened carefully and built on each other's points. For example, students in one of the Burley cluster schools had expressed a desire to have chickens in the school grounds. During the residential, the students were asked to investigate what they would need to do to make this possible. Each of the groups was able to build on the ideas set out by the previous group, demonstrating a real progression of ideas.

But above all, what seemed to be important was that the children found the active learning approaches they encountered during the residential fun. Staff observed that the children so enjoyed what they were doing, and were so eager to participate in the activities, that there was no trouble getting them up, even at 6 o'clock in the morning! What was also clear was that using these student-centred approaches, which put teachers in the role of facilitators, increased the students' ownership of their learning, enabling the students to become more independent learners. The teachers' use of student-centred strategies is examined further in hypothesis 5 about the development of teachers' pedagogical skills, where more examples are also given.

### *Strong relationships*

All participating clusters quoted better relationships between students both during and after the residential. Being able to spend more time with each other during the residential enabled the students to develop better relationships with each other. As one student from Calderglen cluster commented: '*I felt I was better friends with the ones I went with and that I had made friends with people that I didn't really talk to before*'. The students' improved relationships had a noticeable impact on their engagement. For example, East EAZ teachers noted how their students completed a group work task well after they had worked together in the morning, which they felt was because the students had been able to develop closer relationships with each other during the morning activities. Staff at Newall Green similarly noted how students '*worked better as a team and seemed*

to listen to each other and be more enthusiastic' as time went on. But the students' relationships were not always conducive, as this comment made by a student from the Christ Church cluster showed:

*'I was frustrated that because she didn't get her own way, she just stood where she was and didn't cooperate with the team. In the end our team lost'.*

Hanover cluster described in detail the difference improved relationships with his peers made to one boy during the residential and how the relationships were supported by the residential, including the preparations for it.

Before the residential, the child was easily distracted from tasks in school and sometimes slow to complete work. He was aware of this and lacked self-esteem over managing it. Although keen to succeed, he regularly failed to do so. Talking to the child before the residential revealed that he had a difficult relationship with another child and often felt a victim in their relationship. The school had been aware of this on occasion, but not realised the impact it was having on the child.

The child enjoyed the residential enormously, rating it 10/10. He claimed: *'I was happy because I felt safe and had lots of fun'*. He also commented: *'I made more friends and got to know people a bit more'*. During the residential, his teacher noticed how his concentration was much improved when carrying out practical tasks, suggesting that he was a kinaesthetic learner. The issue with the other child turned into a big argument on camp. After the residential, the child commented that the adults on camp, *'dealt with it properly, for once'*. He explained that after the camp, life in school became much better and that he enjoyed school more than he expected because of this.

The staff concluded that talking to the child before and after the residential enabled them to understand and meet his needs more effectively, while observing his behaviour during the residential made his learning style more apparent, enabling the teaching back in school to be better pitched to his needs. The residential also revealed a friendship problem which was dealt with effectively by staff. This had lasting effects back in school.

As well as enhancing the relationships between students, the residential also helped to improve the relationships between staff and students. Clusters reported how the residential gave students and staff time to *'understand each other better'*; they benefited from changes in the group dynamics due to the new context and environment, which lacked the stress and pressure that some of them associated with their school and home life. Members of staff also felt they had an opportunity to *'see students as individuals, see the whole person in each of them'* (teacher, Canterbury) or had the time to talk to the students and *'see beyond the behaviour'* (teacher, Walney), which helped them to understand the students more. Similarly, students saw their teachers from a different perspective, appreciating when staff were willing to take on new challenges alongside them and when they showed empathy and understanding, such as the support mechanisms they put in place to ensure that the students felt happy, safe and secure whilst away from home. Although the clusters themselves did not report on whether the improved staff-student relationships made any difference

to student engagement or achievement, research indicates that it does – see next section. Relationships are explored again in hypotheses 8 and 9.

### **Possible explanations for the outcomes**

When consulted by researchers, students identified four factors that switch students off learning<sup>7</sup>. They were:

- too much emphasis on written work – learners across all key stages, but particularly boys, said they did not enjoy writing
- disruptive behaviour – sometimes students were disruptive because they were bored and their attention was not focused on learning and there was a danger that disengaged students' behaviour led others to switch off learning because of the risk of disruption
- needing help, but not getting it – waiting for help or resources caused some students to engage in disruptive behaviour because they felt bored or frustrated, and
- repetitious, 'easy' and mundane activities, such as completing worksheets and working from textbooks and activities that involved little physical movement.

The residential by contrast involved the students in a wide variety of practical, challenging, problem-solving tasks with plenty of peer support available. Students did not engage in disruptive behaviour because they enjoyed what they were doing and felt supported.

Evidence from a systematic literature review<sup>8</sup> exploring student perspectives on motivation to learn showed that students believed they were better motivated when curriculum experiences:

- were perceived as fun
- were varied and participative
- involved collaboration, and
- included activities that were useful and authentic.

The activities that the clusters organised for their residential were exactly that: fun, varied and participative. They involved collaboration and included activities that were useful and real. Enquiry and problem-solving have also been closely linked to students' progress in meta-cognition as well as increased engagement in learning<sup>9</sup>. International literature reviews have found that contextualisation, challenge, group work and talk are amongst the key characteristics of effective learning and curricula.<sup>10</sup>

As well as the style of learning, relationships between students and adults in schools, and among students themselves, have also been found to be critical to student engagement. In a study involving

---

<sup>7</sup> Flutter, J. & Rudduck, J. (2004) *Consulting pupils: What's in it for schools?* London: Routledge Falmer.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, C., et al. (2005) A systematic review of what pupils aged 11–16 believe impacts on their motivation to learn in the classroom. London: EPPI-Centre Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London.

<sup>9</sup> CUREE & University of Wolverhampton (2009) *How can curriculum innovation help increase participation and engagement?* Coventry: CUREE

<sup>10</sup> Bell, M., Cordingley, P., Gibbons, S. & Hawkins, M. (2008) *QCA Building the Evidence Base: Review of individual studies from Systematic Research Reviews.* Coventry: CUREE

600 teachers and 10,000 students aged 4-18 years<sup>11</sup>, the students of teachers who offered high levels of empathy and who encouraged students' ownership of their learning were compared with students of teachers who did not. The students of the highly empathic and facilitative teachers were found to:

- miss fewer days of school during the year (on average five days compared with nine)
- present fewer disciplinary problems
- be more creative and use higher levels of thinking, and
- make greater gains on academic achievement measures.

One study calculated that the effect size of positive teacher-student relationships on achievement was large (0.72).<sup>12</sup>

## Conclusions

All clusters reported consistently good levels of student engagement during residential and that the level of engagement was often higher than that at school. There were signs that the residential promoted deep engagement, and engaged previously disaffected students and students with challenging behaviour. There was also some evidence that the engagement was sustained back at school and some evidence of improved achievement as a result. The students were engaged because they enjoyed the student-centred approaches (e.g. being involved in co-design and challenging, contextualised group problem-solving activities) and felt supported by their peers, with whom they enjoyed better relationships.

---

<sup>11</sup> Cited in: Rogers, C. and Freiberg, H.J.(1993) *Freedom to learn*. (3rd edn.) New York: Merrill. Summary available at: [www.gtce.org.uk/tla/rft/rogers1008/](http://www.gtce.org.uk/tla/rft/rogers1008/)

<sup>12</sup> Hattie, J. (2009) *Visible Learning: a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. London: Routledge Taylor and Francis.