

# LISTENING TO THE VOICES OF STRUGGLING STUDENTS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Abstract

*Children in mainstream schools who struggle academically and disengage in regular schooling may be helped when teachers change their practice to include what the students themselves have reported makes a difference. Student voices need to be listened to, not as a token gesture, but as a way of making a positive difference in their lives at school and therefore strengthen their ability to be a successful member of society in the future.*

## Keywords

Struggling students; disconnection; student voice; programmes

## Introduction

In the study reported here, I set out to identify programmes for primary and high school students who struggle academically and have been at-risk of failing during their schooling career. The study focused on investigating research that included student voice, where students have had the opportunity to explain to researchers what they found helped them achieve better when they were involved in these types of programmes. My aim was to identify factors that struggling students found that made a difference, and what features in mainstream school education the students found detrimental to their learning. Findings of this study may help teachers modify their practice in mainstream schools when they identify students that need help academically. These findings may also help school leaders select and/or develop appropriate programmes.

I have seen in the context of my primary school, students disengaging from their learning, and often being seen as troublemakers. Many of these students become frustrated to the point where they lash out, or become apathetic and disaffected with school. I doubt if many of these frustrated students are asked why they respond in these ways, or what measures they feel could be taken to further support their learning? I feel that as educators we need to address any issues that may cause these children to be disenchanted with learning so that children at primary school do not move into their future schooling lives with engrained patterns of frustration and silence.

In Western societies, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom over recent years, primary schools have tended to become more focussed on high stakes testing than about teaching and learning. Students are spending increased amounts of time being prepared for various forms of assessment, often formal tests particularly in literacy and mathematics, and teachers feel they have little time to 'teach' anymore as they feel pressured by a mandated curriculum and formal assessment regimes (Eidelson, 2014; Ewing, 2012; Giroux, 2013). This relatively new level of importance for forms of (national) testing and prescribed standards in many Western countries, has tended to over-emphasise student reliance on memory and simple factual recall (Ewing, 2012; Tomlinson, 2000). In the United States (USA) in particular, large amounts of money is spent on resources, including digital devices (which may become obsolete every few years) to help with this testing. The focus on assessment is having an effect on the amount of time teachers offer learning in other subjects beyond literacy and mathematics such as science, the arts, languages and social sciences (Eidelson, 2014; Tomlinson, 2000).

It is important, I believe, for teachers and decision-makers to listen to student voice to find out what may be behind frustration and lack of interest for school, and the subsequent struggle to achieve

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academically. New Zealand researcher Rachel Bolstad (NZCER) highlights that often when schools are looking at using ‘student voice’, they mean,

The development of students’ leadership skills by incorporating student “voices” in forums for decision making on various school matters” or “that students actively build their own meanings from their learning experiences, and that teachers need to hear students “voice” their own views on their learning in order for teachers to identify and support next learning steps. (Bolstad, 2011, p. 31)

However, there is a significant level of attention to student voice in the literature, which maintains that, according to Rudduck and Fielding (2016) “The current popularity of student voice can lead to surface compliance—to a quick response that focuses on ‘how to do it’ rather than a reflective review of ‘why we might want to do it’” (p. 219).

I believe it is important that these students’ voices are not used as a token gesture, but as a real and rich way of finding out what could work. I feel that to make academic success more attainable for struggling and frustrated students, we may look at research literature on intervention or alternative programmes that have been successful in the students eyes and utilise some of the design aspects in our own contexts.

Much of the literature I reviewed was of research conducted by using semi-structured interviews with students who have struggled to achieve academically in mainstream schooling contexts for a variety of reasons. It is findings from this review that I present here.

I found four types of programmes in the research literature reviewed:

- Programmes that study students’ interests and ask them to make a real life contribution in the place where they live (e.g. arts-based and place-based learning).
- Programmes that provide an opportunity for students to talk to a listening adult through one to one adult support (e.g. Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour (RTL) and ‘Reading Recovery’, and ‘Adult Listening Partners’).
- Programmes that involve alternative education outside of tradition school environments (e.g. county community schools, accelerated learning programmes, and ‘Setting and Solution Focused Approach’ schools).
- Programmes that focus on the development of student’s emotional and social skills such as self-management (e.g. ‘Heart Smarts’ and the ‘Incredible Years’).

Across these programme types I identified several similar themes that came through in the literature that help to make a positive difference for struggling students. There were also similar aspects that researchers found that may hinder a struggling student from persisting with their engagement with school learning and reaching their educational potential.

### **What has worked for struggling students?**

Across all types of programmes, those that show students’ strengths and contributions, those that provide one to one support, those that involve alternative education and those that teach self-management skills, three key aspects were highlighted as making a positive difference for struggling students in the research reviewed. These were integrating learning across curriculum areas particularly arts based learning, the opportunity for students to make a meaningful contribution in their school and community, and building in time for teacher-student conversation in order to enhance teacher knowledge of individuals and the teacher-student relationship.

### ***Integrating learning across curriculum areas***

The literature indicated that when the curriculum is altered so that it has either an artistic dimension, or is linked to what students already know outside of the classroom, at-risk students do begin to show greater engagement for their learning. Linking learning to at-risk students personal interests was also seen as important (Ewing, 2012; Finnan & Kombe, 2011; Sobel, 2004; Wootton, 2008). For teachers to know and use student prior-knowledge, learning outside of school and personal interests they need

to take time and effort to listen and get to know individuals. As Wootton (2008) asserts, “Arts education, at its best, allows students to fly into this sky of infinite possibilities. It provides a space for them to show who they are—in all their complexity—to their teachers, friends and communities” (p. 195). I believe that if teachers are willing to integrate a creative element into any curriculum, students could respond positively and may achieve enhanced academic achievement scores and deeper patterns of thinking.

### ***The opportunity to make a contribution***

The literature revealed that students having the opportunity to contribute to decisions about their education to be significant. Being involved in decision-making made the students feel their presence was worthwhile and important to those people who were significant in their lives such as other students, teachers and parents. The opportunity to interact and learn about aspects in their own community, and be involved in decisions that may have a positive effect for their own family was also important. (Ewing, 2012; Lemos, 2010; Tomlinson, 2002). Smith (2002) claims that one of the biggest drawbacks in the way schools in the United States are set up at the moment, is that students are expected to learn about knowledge created by others rather than knowledge the student creates for themselves about their own environment.

Related to the idea of making a valued contribution is emotional self-management. The literature reviewed has shown that when students’ are able to learn techniques in self-management of stress, there has been an improvement in school performance and relationships with others. Learning the skills of self-regulation and the increased social competence that it brings, has also been seen to play a part in future academic success for at-risk students.

### ***Time to talk and build relationships***

A further theme is that these programmes typically provide time for teachers and individual students to develop positive, trusting relationships whereby, the at-risk students feel cared for by their teachers. Students who had this support from a significant adult when they were struggling academically often were able to become re-engaged with their schooling and have a more positive outlook for their future (Balfanz, Herzog, & MacIver, 2007; Lemos, 2010; Tomlinson, 2002). A good proportion of the literature reviewed in this study suggests that if more staff in schools were provided with training in counselling skills, there may be a better quality of adult listening, which in turn could have children gain greater confidence and motivation for learning (Smith, 2006).

Lemos (2010) found that the students involved in the research identified many factors that helped them to achieve better. Interaction and positive communication with teachers, parents and peers was seen to be influential, as was the county school being a positive escape from the realities of a hard home life. Students involved in the study appreciated someone to stand alongside who trusted them to care whether they failed or succeeded, and who would not give up on them. Tomlinson (2002), a Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of Virginia, has a similar view with her notion of ‘invitational learning’ where she found that students did better academically when they felt their teachers cared about them, listened to them, and knew that it mattered to the teacher that they did well.

Students in a Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) study also appreciated their teachers being available to talk to when they had problems at home and for the teachers help to seek out appropriate support for them if needed. The students found teachers in the Setting and Solution-Focused Approach schools non-judgmental when they were having trouble with their schoolwork and were often ready to go the extra mile to find out what would help the students achieve. In their mainstream schools, these students found that teachers were overworked, didn’t have time to talk and individual circumstances such as home life were not taken into account. The students also found that there was an emphasis on standardised testing in the schools they used to attend, which made them feel like failures when they didn’t achieve as well as other students.

Other studies have found that when students have been given the opportunity to talk to a teacher about problems at home, or problems with school-work, this has made an impact on how well they achieve at school (Lemos, 2010; Smith, 2006; Tomlinson, 2002).

Another factor, typically underplayed in the research literature, on these programme was teachers and the school explicitly informing parents about the aims and nature of the programme their child was to participate in, regular feedback and requests for support at home.

### **What hasn't worked for struggling students?**

Literature reviewed also highlighted what struggling students found difficult about traditional classrooms and schools.

#### ***Standardised and competitive assessment***

The literature examined revealed that students who struggle at school often feel unmotivated by traditional teaching and learning methods which are geared towards instruction that will enable students to achieve well in a standardised tests or achieve National Standards benchmarks. Struggling students did not like being compared to others and reported feeling like failures when they didn't achieve as well academically as their peers, which often led to disengagement with school and learning (Smith, 2002).

#### ***Lack of consideration of student circumstances and home life***

Struggling students found that teachers who seemed not to care, as well as being too busy and not available to listen, caused them to be unhappy. This coupled with the teacher not taking individual circumstances or problems at home into account when disciplining students often led to disengagement and frustration (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

Many of these aspects of regular school learning both positive and negative are impacted by class size. Having a smaller class size underlines the opportunity for teachers and students to have time to talk and listen, to build relationships, and for students to make a contribution. Students reported greater engagement with school and enjoyed the closer attention of their teachers in small classes (Lemos, 2010; Smith, 2006).

### **Conclusion**

In this literature review, I examined programmes aimed at supporting primary and high school students who have been academically struggling and at risk of failing at school, or who have been expelled from a traditional classroom environment. The review included both programmes that operated outside of a classroom or school, and those that have been tried inside schools and classrooms.

This review examined research that included the voices of students who had the opportunity to explain what has, and has not been beneficial for them during their schooling. What was found to be beneficial in the programmes reviewed in this study were integrating learning across curriculum areas: specifically adding an arts element; time for students to talk with teachers and build relationship; the opportunity for students to contribute in meaningful ways.

The literature showed that if teaching staff want to address the issues of frustrated and disengaged students who often become apathetic and disaffected with school, there are options that do not necessarily depend on the implementation of special programmes. If educators alter the way they deliver the curriculum, adding an artistic dimension and/or utilise the students' strengths and allow them to contribute more, there may be a positive change in student attitude. A more positive attitude could lead to re-engagement in learning and greater academic success.

If school leaders can facilitate smaller classes, and therefore provide teachers more time to develop relationships with their students, this may have a positive effect on struggling students' behaviour and engagement. If teachers can put their energies into providing quality-learning experiences, which focus not so much on the comparison of students academically, struggling students may feel more enthusiasm to try at school and be hopeful of learning progress and achievement. Even with the limitations of a mandated curriculum and National Standards, if teachers strategically plan to take individual students circumstances into account and actively seek to connect with parents to gather

more information about home life, this may have a positive effect on students' levels of frustration at school.

A limitation of this literature review was that some of the research reviewed used control groups. Caution is needed when looking at the outcome of comparative studies when it is suggested that the only difference between any two groups is the programme implemented. No two classes are alike in every other respect. It was also the case that some of the research literature involved people evaluating their own projects, although typically not alone. Another limitation of this review is that it is a small literature review.

### So what are the opportunities for further research?

A future research project could focus on interviewing teachers to find out what they identify as significant aspects to their practice that support student engagement and achievement. Further research could be undertaken to track students who have been involved in special programmes during their schooling, asking them how they see themselves in society as adults, and what difference they attribute to participation in the programme. For school leaders and teachers there is an opportunity to establish a teaching as inquiry-professional development programme in school where teachers select one of the key aspects students believe support their success, investigate this further and develop their practice within a regular classroom setting.

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