

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

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**Youth Disaffection: An Interplay of  
Social Environment, Motivation, and Self-Construals**

Selected Extracts

## Thesis Summary

Youth disaffection is associated with huge personal and social costs, with future trajectories typically marked by school exclusion, poverty, unemployment, youth offending, and substance abuse. Core theoretical frameworks including perspectives concerning self-determination, self-discrepancy, and achievement motivation provide explanations for the role of social-environment factors, self-concepts and cognitions in human motivation. However, there has been little work to integrate these theories into a nuanced account of the socio-motivational processes underpinning school disaffection, and our understanding of how interventions may work to re-direct the negative trajectories remains weak. This thesis includes four papers reporting on a programme of theoretical and empirical research conducted in order to address this gap in knowledge.

The first, a theoretical paper, presents an integrated model of the development of school disaffection in which multiple self-construals play a key role in bridging the gap between need fulfilment and cognitive and behavioural indicators of school disaffection. The second paper reports on a thematic analysis of extensive semi-structured individual interviews with school-excluded young people and practitioners working with them. In accordance with our theoretical model, the accounts of the young people's emotional and behavioural profiles in achievement contexts were connected to need-thwarting social experiences, with maladaptive constructions of multiple selves appearing to mediate the relationship between these factors.

The third paper presents an analysis of quantitative survey data with school-excluded and mainstream secondary school pupils that investigated the direct and mediated pathways between key processes identified by our model. Results showed that pathways between key variables were moderated by the experience of exclusion such that distinct pathways emerged

for excluded and non-excluded pupils. The final paper reports on an in-depth, longitudinal, idiographic study exploring the impact of theatre involvement on marginalised young people. Results from an interpretative phenomenological analysis of interview transcripts suggested that the nurturing, creative environment of the theatre project provided optimal conditions for promoting resilience and self-development in youth at risk.

Together, the findings from this programme of research highlight the crucial role played by social experiences in the development of school disaffection via the impact on self-construals, motivation and achievement goals, as well as the role they can play in supporting young people to create more positive life trajectories. This body of work has implications for further research and also carries practical implications for interventions and school-based practices seeking to both support school-disaffected children, and increase engagement in those at risk of school disaffection.

## **Introduction**

### **School Disaffection: Characteristics and Antecedents**

Disengagement from school has been referred to as a spectrum, with those toward the extreme end characterised by infrequent attendance and a negative attitude toward – as well as making little or no effort at – school (Steedman & Stoney, 2004). With many young people failing within mainstream education – 5,170 young people were permanently excluded from schools in England in 2011/12 and there were 304,370 fixed period exclusions during the same academic year – there are increasing concerns about the personal and societal impact of youth disaffection, and increasing awareness of its link to social exclusion (DfE, 2013; SEU, 2000). Indeed, research indicates that young people who are persistently absent or excluded from school disproportionately experience social and psychological barriers to achievement experiences such that they are less likely to be in education, employment or training at age 18 (DfE, 2011; DfE, 2012), while their future trajectories are associated with negative outcomes including experiencing homelessness, substance misuse, mental health problems, and incarceration in their adult lives (Coles, Godfrey, Keung, Parroott, & Bradshaw, 2010; DfE, 2012; SEU, 2000; Steer, 2000; Summerfield, 2011).

Whilst disaffected youth are recognised as a heterogeneous group, characteristics commonly ascribed to school-excluded youth include a) disruptive behaviour (DETR, 1999; Steer, 2000); b) repeated failures at school, low self-esteem and low confidence (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Maguin & Loeber, 1996; McEvoy & Welker, 2000; Steer, 2000); and c) social backgrounds characterised by low SES, family turmoil, negative peer group influence and community norms, and institutional or foster care (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Daniels et al., 2003; Estévez & Emler, 2010; Rumberger, 1995).

## **Psychological Frameworks for Understanding Engagement and Disaffection at School**

Considering the considerable personal and social costs of youth disaffection at school, research which can shed light on the development of maladaptive motivational states in young people will have important implications for the creation of effective interventions and for informing the decisions of policymakers. An understanding of the psychological dimensions underpinning these factors associated with disaffected students come from core psychological theories of motivation.

**Attributions for successes and failures.** The motivational framework of attribution theory (Weiner, 1985; Weiner, 1986) provides a possible explanation for emotions and motivational orientations in school contexts by emphasising the importance of the individual's construction or perception of an event. Specifically, attribution theory (Weiner, 1985; Weiner, 1986) proposes that diverse emotions are generated by successes and failures depending on the causes attributed to these events. Within the context of school achievement, different attributions ascribed to successes and failures have implications for motivation. For example, a pupil who ascribes a failure at school to a fundamental lack of ability may perceive this cause to be internal, stable over time, and beyond their control. This in turn is likely to lead to a lack of motivation and effort. However, for a pupil who ascribes a failure to lack of effort, hope is fostered because even though this is an internal cause, it is not stable and is within personal control (Graham, 1991; Weiner, 1986). Causal dimensions are linked in turn to particular psychological outcomes including expectancy about future outcomes, and self-appraisals and emotions (Graham, 1991; Weiner, 1986).

**Achievement goals.** The lack of motivation associated with disaffected youth, as well as the low levels of self-esteem observed in this population, may also be partially explained by goal framing. Achievement goal theory proposes that different goal frameworks lead to

different affective reactions to tasks, such that an individual who has ‘performance’ or ‘ego’ goals – i.e., who focuses on the ‘objective’ performance indicators that can be compared across individuals – interprets their failure to achieve these goals as indicative of low ability (Diener & Dweck, 1978, 1980; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). In this way failure becomes a threat to self-esteem, and is associated with feelings of anxiety, depression and shame, or may lead to defensive reactions such as those seen in disaffected pupils, for example the devaluing of tasks, boredom and the expression of disdain (Diener & Dweck, 1978, 1980; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). On the other hand, for individuals with ‘learning’ or ‘mastery’ goals – i.e., who focus more on the process of learning and personal progress in mastering a task – failure indicates the need for more effort and a different strategy for mastery. In this sense failure to achieve goals is viewed as an opportunity for greater learning and leads to heightened positive affect and determination (Diener & Dweck, 1978, 1980; Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

**Self-worth and academic self-concepts.** Work by Covington and colleagues (1984; 1992; Covington & Beery, 1976) has outlined how self-worth may work to undermine or strengthen achievement motivation, thereby providing a useful way of understanding how this aspect of self-construal may lead to behavioural disengagement at school. The self-worth theory of achievement motivation asserts that in order to protect their self-worth individuals will withdraw their effort to avoid failure (Covington, 1984; Covington & Beery, 1976; Thompson, 1994). Withdrawal of effort means that subsequent failures cannot be ascribed to lack of ability which has consequences for feelings of self-worth (Covington, 1979, 1981, 1984, 1992). In addition to withdrawal of effort, self-handicapping strategies are employed by those who have experienced repeated failures in an effort to protect self-worth in achievement contexts (Covington, 1984; Covington & Beery, 1976; Thompson, 1994). Self-handicapping strategies include low risk-taking behaviours such as engaging in easy activities, last-minute revision, and procrastination. Deliberately selecting very difficult tasks

is another strategy which allows for causal attributions that focus on the difficulty of the task, rather than low ability, following failure. Other strategies include opting out and disruptive behaviour (Thompson, 1994). As might be expected, longitudinal research (Zuckerman, Kieffer, & Knee, 1998) shows that self-handicapping is associated with worse performance compared to those who do not self-handicap.

**Self-discrepancies.** The differing consequences for motivation associated with perceptions of the self are also explored by self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987, 1989). Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987, 1989) posits three domains of the self that underpin negative emotions. The first, the actual self, constitutes an individual's representation of the attributes they (or another person) believe(s) they possess (Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999; Higgins, 1987). The second and third represent self-guides against which the actual self is compared in a process of self-evaluation. The ought self is a person's representation of the attributes believe they should, or ought to, possess. Ought selves are not intrinsically desired selves but selves to approach in order to avoid the disapproval of others (Carver et al., 1999; Higgins, 1987). Finally, the ideal self is a person's representation of the attributes that they would ideally like themselves to possess. In this way ideal selves are connected to intrinsic desires (Carver et al., 1999; Higgins, 1987). Self-discrepancy theory claims that individuals seek congruency between their actual self and their self-guides, and that when there are discrepancies negative emotions are produced (Carver et al., 1999; Higgins, 1987). For example, studies show that disparities between 'actual' and 'ideal' self-representations are associated with emotions of dejection such as disappointment, dissatisfaction, and sadness, whereas disparities between 'actual' and 'ought' self-representations are associated with emotions of agitation such as fear, threat, and restlessness (Higgins, 1989; Scott & O'Hara, 1993; Strauman, 1989; Strauman & Higgins, 1987).

**Possible selves.** That perceived discrepancies between different concepts of the self have motivational and behavioural consequences has also been posited by Markus and Nurius (1986), and later by Oyserman (2008), in their conception of ‘possible selves’. Possible selves are an individual’s imagined future selves and as such represent an individual’s goals, aspirations, and fears (Markus & Nurius, 1986; for a review, see Oyserman & James, 2011). Possible selves are selves to be approached or avoided and thus serve as motives and incentives for behaviour (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman & Markus, 1990; Oyserman, 2008). It is proposed that possible selves generate affect in two ways. Firstly, each possible self, whether positive or negative, is understood to be linked to the associated positive or negative affect. Secondly, when discrepancies between self-concepts are perceived, such as a discrepancy between an individual’s current self and their positive future self, positive or negative self-feelings are generated to the degree that an individual perceives that it is possible or likely for them to achieve that particular future self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Furthermore, it is understood that when positive future possible selves come with plausible strategies and are congruent with identities significant to an individual they can provide motivation (Oyserman, 2008). Finally, balance between feared and positive expected possible selves in the same domain is posited to be crucial for possible selves to achieve maximal motivational effectiveness (Oyserman & Markus, 1990).

**Self-determination and need fulfilment.** Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1991; Ryan, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000a) provides a theoretical framework for understanding the link between non-optimal environmental factors that characterise the backgrounds of disaffected youths in the education system, and the type of motivational orientation exhibited at school. SDT proposes the existence of three basic psychological needs – competence, relatedness and autonomy – that are essential for an individual to experience ideal growth, social development and personal well-being. Within STD,



competence captures the experience of engaging in optimal challenges, feeling confident and effectual in tackling challenges, and receiving encouraging feedback; relatedness describes a feeling of connectedness, belonging, and being cared about; and autonomy refers to having agency or acting from the authentic self (Ryan, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2004). It is proposed that when these basic psychological needs are thwarted due to unfavourable environmental factors, the development of optimal self-motivation, social functioning, and personal well-being are affected and undermined (Grouzet, Vallerand, Thill, & Provencher, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

These patterns are linked with the broad distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. When behaviour is intrinsically motivated an activity is undertaken because of a genuine interest in the activity and for the inherent enjoyment of taking part in it. However, when behaviour is extrinsically motivated an activity is undertaken for the exclusive purpose of achieving some separate outcome (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Vallerand, Fortier, & Guay, 1997). According to SDT different types of motivation – intrinsic and extrinsic – are facilitated or thwarted by social-contextual events, such as feedback and rewards, to the extent that they satisfy the basic needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Finally, individuals who are amotivated are lacking motivation, which means that their behaviour is not purposeful as the activity in question is not valued or is felt to be outside an individual's capabilities (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Vallerand et al., 1997).

### **Approaches that Shape the Developmental Trajectories of Disaffected Youths**

**School-based initiatives designed to reduce school exclusion.** With the number of pupils being excluded from school peaking in the mid '90s (DfE, 2012; Hallam & Castle, 2001), the development and implementation of initiatives designed to reduce the number of young people being excluded from school became a key government policy. Interventions

aimed at improving school attendance and behaviour – both for young people at risk of exclusion as well as for those who have already been excluded – include: Learning Support Units (LSUs) and Behaviour and Education Support Teams (BESTs) which have been shown to have a positive impact on children, parents, and schools (Hallam & Rogers, 2005); learning mentors, the deployment of which has been shown to benefit home-school liaisons in addition to benefits for pupils (Hallam, Castle, & Rogers, 2005; Hallam & Rogers, 2008); parenting programmes, which can improve behaviour in children and young offenders, and reduce conflict at home (for an extensive evaluation on programmes with the parents of young offenders see Ghate & Ramella, 2002, and with the parents of pupils, see Hallam, Rogers, & Shaw, 2004); alternative curricula (Hallam, Rogers, & Rhamie, 2010), and behaviour programmes, for which positive effects on aggressive and disruptive behaviour have been found (see Wilson & Lipsey, 2007 for a meta-analysis). Additionally, interventions targeting self-concepts and cognitions include those designed to alter self-concepts (Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002) and achievement-related cognitions (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007).

**Alternative ways of engaging youth at risk.** A growing awareness of the potential of alternative projects or experiences for re-directing the negative trajectories of pupils at risk has also developed, particularly over the past decade. This has in part been spurred by the UK government's Green Paper for Youth (*Youth Matters*), published in July 2005, which set out an agenda for integrated services for young people with an emphasis on empowering more young people to engage in positive, constructive activities including sporting activities, youth groups, cultural activities, and activities that encourage “creativity, innovation and enterprise” and “enriching experiences”, involving a range of resources and providers including voluntary groups (DfES, 2005, p. 32). Here we outline some of these approaches:

***Sports-based programmes.*** Sporting activities are recognised widely as an effective mode of working with disaffected youths to facilitate personal and social development (DfES, 2005; Sandford, Armour, & Warmington, 2006; Sandford, Duncombe, & Armour, 2008). Physical activities are understood to be engaging for many disaffected young people as they are perceived as practical, as opposed to academic, and relevant (Sandford et al., 2006; Steer, 2000). Research conducted to investigate ‘what works?’ in sports interventions with disaffected youths has identified multiple factors that are crucial for successful outcomes; these include positive relationships with adults which provide disaffected youths with positive role models that may otherwise be absent in their lives, a sense of a supportive social environment, and a sense of personal agency and empowerment (see Sandford et al., 2006; Sandford et al., 2008). ‘Successful outcomes’ from sports programmes include improved behaviour and attendance at school, improved engagement at school, more positive relationships with teachers, greater confidence, self-esteem, and resiliency, as well as increased communication skills and leadership skills (Sandford et al., 2006; Sandford et al., 2008).

***General arts-based programmes.*** It has been suggested that interventions that employ the creative arts may have added benefits beyond outcomes associated with a broad range of alternative provision, including a new understanding of, and skills in, the particular art form engaged in, creativity and self-expression, and transferable skills, which together mean that “the arts have the power to transform lives and communities” (Arts Council England, 2005, p, 2; see also Harland et al., 2000; Kinder & Harland, 2004; Wilkin et al., 2005).

Arts initiatives specifically targeting youth at risk have also been increasingly employed as their ability to reach disaffected youths is ever more recognised (Wilkin et al., 2005). Important advances in our understanding of the impact of such work comes from a number of studies which have evaluated arts-based projects with disaffected young people in

the last decade; these include arts activities such as dance, craft, music, painting, film, circus skills, t-shirt design, drumming and photography (Hirst & Robertshaw, 2003; Wilkin et al., 2005). For example, research carried out to examine the impact of arts projects in PRUs and LSUs using qualitative and quantitative measures document a wide range of benefits for pupils including: an increase in knowledge and skills in the particular art form; greater listening and communication skills; increased group-work skills; greater confidence and self-esteem; positive changes in behaviour; and a sense of achievement and enjoyment from activities (Wilkin et al., 2005). Furthermore, the distinctive contribution of the arts has also been highlighted by projects. Interviewees – pupils, teachers, and artists – in the study by Wilkin and colleagues (2005) perceived the arts to be uniquely beneficial to disaffected young people because of its practical nature; the opportunity for achievement experiences that it provides; its cultural relevance; the space it provides for self-expression; and its inherent support for the holistic development of the child.

***Drama and theatre.*** Drama and theatre constitute a particularly interesting context for working with marginalised young people given that theoretical frameworks of drama and theatre have long advocated its therapeutic effects (Blatner, 1997; Boal, 2002; Boal, 1995; Holmes, Karp, & Watson, 1994). Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2002; Boal, 1995) has been employed widely in its many manifestations, to empower oppressed groups including homeless women (Woodson, 2012), Aboriginal victims of domestic violence (Diamond, 1994), and more recently those suffering with individual 'oppressions' such as loneliness, fear of emptiness, and alienation (Boal, 1995; Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz, 1994). Likewise, Jacob Moreno's Psychodrama is considered to elicit a growth in self-awareness and transformation through "dramatization, role playing, and dramatic self-presentation" (Kellermann, 1992, p. 20). Here drama allows for perspective-taking with the

actor-client playing different roles in familiar scenarios – including one's own and others' – thereby encouraging alternative perspectives.

Taken together, this suggests that employing drama and theatre techniques in interventions with youth at risk may be a particularly fruitful approach. Support for the unique benefits that drama and theatre activities can accord marginalised young people comes from an Arts Council England (2006) report on a drama-based project carried out with a small cohort of at-risk youths over a two-week period. The results of evaluation of this project indicated that the experience had been an enriching one and that there had been substantial personal development for the young people over the course of the two weeks including changes in attitudes to adults so that they were more positive by the end of the project; group bonding; a sense of enjoyment and achievement – as well as pride in achievement; increased confidence in communication skills; positive relationships with adults; and the development of new coping strategies (Arts Council England, 2006).

A small number of studies have also evaluated projects with young offenders and at-risk youth that have employed drama and theatre activities such as role play and characterisation based on personal experiences. The findings from these studies are encouraging in terms of the personal and social development of participants, with evidence of benefits including the development of more pro-social behaviours, positive identity changes, self-belief, self-efficacy, motivation, confidence in social skills, and increased agency (Bradley, Deighton, & Selby, 2004; for a review see Daykin, Orme, Evans, & Salmon, 2008; Harkins et al., 2011; James & McNeil, 2009; McArdle et al., 2002; Turner, 2007).

## **1.4 Overview of Empirical Studies**

This thesis includes four papers that address our aims. Our first paper was designed to draw together existing theoretical frameworks for understanding motivation to create a more nuanced account of developmental pathways to youth disaffection at school through a consideration of multiple self-construals as a potential mediator between social environmental experiences and behavioural and emotional outcomes. In our second paper we aimed to further develop our model, and examine its plausibility, by listening to the lived experiences of disaffected youth. In our third paper we sought to test our model of the development of disaffection by investigating the direct and mediated pathways between key processes identified by our model, while also examining whether pathways would be moderated by experiences of school exclusion. Our final paper aimed to identify the impact of involvement in a theatre-based project on marginalised youth and to examine whether the core factors identified by our theoretical model of disaffection could illuminate the psychological processes underlying this impact. The basic rationale, methodology, and hypotheses for each paper are presented below.

### **Paper 1: Who Am I? Incorporating Multiple Self-Construals into a Model of School Disaffection in Youths**

This theoretical paper draws together existing theoretical frameworks for understanding socio-motivational processes – including perspectives outlined above concerning self-determination, self-discrepancies, and motivations – into one integrated model of the development of school disaffection. In particular, our goal was to illustrate how multiple self-construals – particularly self-discrepancies and possible selves – may form a powerful bridge between social environmental experiences and motivational, behavioural, and emotional outcomes associated with disaffected pupils. This theoretical work built on

existing 'self-system' models of motivational development in which the self is implicated in mediating the effects of social environmental contexts on levels of engagement at school, but which nonetheless have not yet considered a role for a more elaborate and multi-faceted analysis of self. Our aim was to develop a more nuanced account of developmental pathways to disaffection in order to apply this approach in our research with school-excluded young people. Our proposed model also aimed to show how a consideration of reciprocal links between key constructs, which may amplify and reinforce adaptive or maladaptive self-construals, motivations, or indeed environments, may lead to vicious cycles of disaffection and the negative trajectories associated with school exclusion.

## **Paper 2: 'I Think Education is Bulls\*\*t': Socio-Motivational Pathways to Disaffection in School-Excluded Young People**

Our next goal was to test the plausibility of our integrated model, and to extend it if necessary, by examining whether the lived experiences of school-excluded young people could be explained through a consideration of pathways set out in our model. In order to explore the young people's lived experiences, qualitative methods were employed with a sample of 10 young people who had been permanently excluded from school and were either currently attending or previously had attended a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), as well as 6 members of staff working with them. The study involved extensive semi-structured individual interviews in which both the young people and staff were asked questions about the young people's school experiences, their experiences of exclusion, their feelings about education, how they saw themselves, their relationships with teachers, family and peers, and how they saw their futures. The paper reports on a thematic analysis of the resulting interview transcripts. In accordance with our proposed model of the development of school disaffection, we expected that accounts of the young people's behavioural, emotional, and

motivational profile of school disengagement would be associated with accounts of need-thwarting family and school experiences in which the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness are not met. We also sought to evaluate the proposition that the relationship between accounts of behaviour, emotions and motivation in the academic context on the one hand, and need-thwarting social experiences on the other, would be mediated by maladaptive constructions of multiple selves.

### **Paper 3: Understanding Pathways to School Disaffection: Associations between Environmental Experiences, Self-Construals, Cognitions, and Behavioural Orientations**

In order to understand the links between variables in our theoretical model of the development of school disaffection, our next step was to test our model with a sample of school-excluded, and non-school-excluded, pupils using quantitative methods. Our initial aim in this study was to examine whether secondary school pupils who have been excluded from school differ in terms of key processes identified in our model compared to pupils who have not experienced exclusion, and to investigate the direct and mediated pathways among key constructs identified by our model. Our subsequent aim was to examine whether pathways between variables would be moderated by experiences of school exclusion such that distinct patterns in pathways exist for school-excluded pupils compared to pupils who have not experienced exclusion. We drew on data collected from pupils in secondary school (N = 209) – approximately half of whom had experienced school-exclusion – using survey style questionnaires that tapped into key variables identified by our model of school disaffection.

This study tested three broad hypotheses that underpinned our analysis. First, we expected to find differences between school-excluded and non-school-excluded pupils in our sample on key variables in our study including experiences of social environments, self-construals, cognitions, motivations and aspirations, and on behavioural and emotional



responses to interpersonal situations. Second, we hypothesised that social environmental experiences would predict self-construals, which would in turn predict patterns of cognition and motivation, and finally that those cognitions and motivations would in turn predict pupils' reports on behavioural and emotional outcomes (measured in the context of specific hypothetical scenarios). We also expected that variables in our model associated with self-construals and cognitions and motivations would significantly mediate pathways from social-environmental experiences to behaviours and emotions. Finally, we hypothesised that the experience of exclusion would moderate pathways such that distinct patterns in pathways would exist for school excluded and non-school-excluded young people.

#### **Paper 4: “It Makes Me Feel Alive”: The Socio-Motivational Impact of Drama and Theatre on Marginalised Young People**

In our final paper we sought to examine whether key psychological factors in our model of disaffection could help us understand pathways out of disaffection. This study aimed to identify the impact of involvement in a drama and theatre project on marginalised youth by listening to their voiced experiences, and to examine whether key processes identified by our theoretical model of disaffection could illuminate the impact of their experience. A longitudinal, idiographic approach was employed in order to fully capture the rich and complex lived experiences of four young people involved in a drama and theatre project which catered for youths at risk. The study employed a qualitative longitudinal (QL) design in order to capture change and continuity of experience for the duration of the participants' involvement in the drama and theatre project. The study involved individual semi-structured interviews at three separate time points over 22 months in which participants were asked about their experiences of the theatre project. The paper reports on an

interpretative phenomenological analysis of the resulting interview transcripts as well as a discussion of the psychological processes that can explain the impact identified.

### **Paper Titles and Abstracts**

#### **Paper 1 – Who Am I? Incorporating Multiple Self-Construals into a Model of School Disaffection in Youths**

Existing 'self-system' models of motivational development implicate the self as playing a key role in mediating the effects of social environmental contexts on youths' motivational, behavioural, and emotional profiles at school. A more nuanced account of these developmental pathways can help us move forward in applying this approach to school disaffection in young people, in terms of both theory and practice. We propose that a consideration of multiple self-construals – particularly self-discrepancies and possible selves – helps to form a powerful bridge between ideas about need fulfilment within self-determination theory and numerous psychological and behavioural indicators of school disaffection. The conceptual integration of these perspectives, alongside existing knowledge about psychopathology and sociocultural influences, sets an agenda for future research and policy development concerning youths at risk of dropping out from the mainstream education system.

#### **Paper 2 – “I Think Education is Bulls\*\*t”: Socio-Motivational Pathways to Disaffection in School-Excluded Young People**

Various theoretical frameworks have been used to explain the development of school disaffection in young people who have been excluded from mainstream education, but the extent to which an integration of these frameworks fits with the lived experience of such youths is not yet clear. A qualitative study was designed to evaluate, and further develop, a

theoretical model of school disaffection in young people which draws together perspectives concerning self-determination, self-discrepancy, and achievement motivation. Extensive semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten young people who were either currently attending or previously had attended a Pupil Referral Unit (4 male, 6 female; aged 14-20 years), and six members of staff (4 male, 2 female) working with them. Results of thematic analysis provide support for a model of disaffection which includes mediated and reciprocal pathways between: a) fulfilment of basic needs in the social experiences of these young people; b) perceptions of, and discrepancies between, multiple selves; and c) motivational, emotional, and behavioural profiles in achievement contexts. Directions for further research and intervention are discussed.

### **Paper 3 – Understanding Pathways to School Disaffection: Associations between Social Experiences, Self-Construals, Cognitions, and Behavioural Orientations**

Existing theoretical frameworks identify a range of constructs involved in young people's socio-motivational engagement at school. However, the systematic associations among these remain poorly understood, particularly in the case of those with high levels of school disaffection. Results from a cross-sectional study with 209 secondary school pupils, half of whom had been excluded from mainstream school, confirmed numerous differences between school-excluded and non-school-excluded pupils. Structural equation modelling revealed indirect links between perceived parental support and reports on behavioural and emotional responses to potential conflict situations, via self-worth, helpless attribution patterns, and extrinsic aspirations. Distinct pathways emerged for excluded and non-excluded pupils. The findings highlight the interplay of perceived family relationships with cognitive and motivational processes at school.

## **Paper 4 – “It Makes Me Feel Alive”: The Socio-Motivational Impact of Drama and Theatre on Marginalised Young People**

An in-depth, longitudinal, idiographic study examined the impact of theatre and drama involvement on marginalised young people. Semi-structured interviews, at three separate time points over two years, were conducted with four young people involved in a theatre project. Interpretative phenomenological analysis suggested that applied theatre creates space and support for the authentic self, and provides optimal conditions for promoting positive growth and resilience through voluntary engagement in a positive activity. In particular, the young people’s accounts pointed to the pivotal role of interpersonal relationships and a nurturing environment in re-engaging young people. Some participants’ accounts also suggested that drama provides a uniquely engaging and therapeutic way to reflect on, express and explore experiences. The results are discussed in relation to core psychological processes underpinning self-development and key directions for further research.

### **General Discussion**

#### **Summary of Findings**

#### **The Development of a Theoretical Model of Youth Disaffection at School**

Our first aim was to advance our understanding of theoretical frameworks which could explain the socio-motivational processes at play in the development of youth disaffection at school. We did this by synthesising theoretical explanations from the extant literature as well as by paying close attention to the lived experiences of disaffected youths. First, Paper 1 drew together relevant frameworks already identified within the literature into a holistic model of the development of youth disaffection at school. These included motivational and cognitive frameworks for understanding disaffected youths’ responses to

failure and performance avoidance such as achievement goal theory (Dweck & Leggett, 1988) and attribution theory (Weiner, 1985), as well as accounts of basic need fulfilment as outlined by self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000a), which provides a framework for understanding the role played by environmental contexts in the development of disaffection.

Uniquely, the model proposed that in addition to direct links between key processes identified in the model, multiple self-construals mediate the effects of need-thwarting environments on subsequent motivational, behavioural, and emotional outcomes, thus refining and strengthening our understanding of school disaffection. Furthermore, reciprocal links between different constructs in our model were considered to be likely based on work on children's social adjustment which show that social experiences both influence, and are influenced by, cognitive and motivational processes (see Crick & Dodge, 1994). It was also considered that these feedback loops help to explain how some pupils get trapped in vicious cycles of disaffection that lead to further marginalisation, and eventually to entrenched social exclusion.

This model of youth disaffection at school was supported by the in-depth accounts from our qualitative study with school-excluded young people and staff working with them, reported in Paper 2. Specifically, young people's behavioural and emotional profile of school disengagement were linked with accounts of home and school experiences that described unsupportive environments that failed to provide the young people with the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness. Furthermore, our analysis supported the proposition that maladaptive constructions of multiple selves mediate the relationship between need-thwarting social experience on the one hand, and behaviour, emotions and motivation in the academic context on the other. Furthermore, as well as illuminating the likely psychological pathways from unsupportive environments to school

disaffection, our findings allowed us to extend and enrich the model because an additional process – the conception of an inauthentic self – emerged from accounts resulting in a richer picture of how multiple self-construals may mediate pathways between unsupportive social environments and maladaptive behaviours.

### **Testing Direct and Indirect Pathways in Our Model of Youth Disaffection at School**

Our second aim was to test our model of school disaffection by investigating what direct and indirect pathways exist among the core constructs identified by our model, including those related to social environmental experiences, self-construals, cognitions, and reports on behavioural and emotional outcomes, as well as examining the role of school exclusion in moderating these pathways. First, Paper 3 showed that PRU pupils differed significantly from their mainstream peers in terms of their environmental experiences with those in the PRU experiencing a greater number of significant life events, and perceiving both their parents and mainstream school teachers to be less supportive. PRU pupils' attributions for academic successes and failures also differed from their mainstream peers, in that they made more external attributions for academic successes and more ability and external attributions for academic failures. As expected, PRU and mainstream pupils also differed in terms of their aspirations and achievement goals with PRU pupils identifying extrinsic goals as more important relative to intrinsic goals, whilst also scoring lower on measures of mastery goals, and academic efficacy, compared to mainstream pupils. On measures of self-perceptions, however, PRU and mainstream pupils did not differ, with no difference found between groups on the false self or self-worth measures. Finally, the use of hypothetical vignettes to measure behavioural and emotional responses showed that PRU pupils responded with more negative emotions and with more positive perceptions of aggressive behaviour than their peers in mainstream school.

Second, Paper 3 provided quantitative support for our model, with support for the expected links between key processes such that social environmental experiences (operationalised as perceived parent and teacher support) predicted self-construals as well as cognitions relating to academic attributions and goals, which in turn predicted young people's reports on behavioural and emotional responses to interpersonal scenarios. Third, results of our analysis showed support for hypothesised mediated pathways from social-environmental experiences to behavioural and emotional responses to hypothetical vignettes, via self-worth, cognitions and motivations including helpless attributions and extrinsic aspirations.

Finally, pathways between these variables were found to be moderated by the experience of exclusion such that distinct pathways emerged for excluded and non-excluded pupils. Specifically, our analysis showed that for excluded pupils perceived parental support of psychological needs was a much stronger predictor of cognitions and motivations compared to measures of perceived teacher support, with parental support positively predicting mastery goals and negatively predicting helpless attributions. However, for mainstream pupils perceived supportiveness of teachers and levels of self-worth predicted cognitions and motivation, with teacher support positively predicting mastery goals and self-efficacy, while self-worth negatively predicted helpless attributions. Furthermore, in Paper 2, some interviewees – both PRU pupils and staff members – commented explicitly that what was going on at home troubled the young people much more than any school-related factors and had the greatest impact on their behavioural and emotional presentations at school. These findings highlight the particular importance of perceived parental support for young people who experience behavioural, emotional and motivational difficulties at school.

### **The Role of Social Experiences in Building Pathways Out of Disaffection**

Our final aim was to evaluate social experiences as a key factor in pathways into, and pathways out of, disaffection by listening to the voices of marginalised young people. First, results from the theory-driven thematic analysis of interviews with school-excluded young people in Paper 2 showed that while experiences of mainstream school had been overwhelmingly negative for the young people most of the young people in contrast described their experiences of the PRU as highly positive. Here the psychological needs of relatedness and autonomy were seen to be met through a new emphasis on building strong pupil-teacher relationships as well as more appropriate staff responses to pupils' often challenging behaviour, based on a deeper understanding of external pressures faced by many pupils. Furthermore, competence needs were seen to be met through the internalisation of staff confidence and belief in the young people's potential and ability. Here, the lack of need fulfilment experienced in other contexts was seen to be counteracted through a supportive school environment such that the future trajectories for at least some of the young people appeared to move towards positive future selves that were being actively pursued with a new sense of personal agency.

The centrality of perceived support from parents or guardians and teachers was again highlighted by findings in Paper 3 whereby social environmental experiences were found to predict self-construals such that greater perceived support for psychological needs from parents negatively predicted having a false-self and positively predicted feelings of self-worth. There were also direct links between social environmental experiences and cognitions and motivations, with greater perceptions of parental support predicting having more mastery goals and fewer helpless attributions, while perceiving teachers to be more supportive of psychological needs also predicted having more mastery goals, fewer helpless attributions and a greater sense of academic self-efficacy. Similarly, in Paper 2, the importance of social environmental experiences was again highlighted by interviewees, many of whom expressed



that concerns about stressful home-life situations, and the impact of turbulent relationships with parents, had detrimental impacts on the extent to which they could, or wished to, engage with school.

Lastly, the results of our interpretative phenomenological analysis of the accounts of four marginalised young people who took part in a long term drama and theatre project (Paper 4) illustrated how by providing a social environment which is nurturing for the self, drama and theatre projects can support a unique opportunity for self-development in marginalised young people. Specifically, an examination of psychological processes likely to underpin the young people's experiences pointed to the crucial role of relationships and social contexts in providing environments which supported the needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy as outlined by self-determination theory. Through integration of nutrients from the social environment the development of the self was made possible, reflected in changes in perceived self-discrepancies and possible selves, the expression of an authentic self, and self-efficacy. Finally, the social context of the drama and theatre project provided a space within which intrinsic motivation, as well as mastery and achievement experiences, could be enjoyed and further nurture the self along new trajectories of development.

## **6.5 Conclusions**

Overall, the programme of work presented in this thesis supports our model of the development of youth disaffection and advances our understanding through a dual approach of idiographic enquiry and empirical testing. Self-construals, and cognitions and motivations including maladaptive achievement goals, attributions, and aspirations, were shown to mediate associations between need-thwarting home and school environments, and maladaptive behavioural and emotional outcomes in secondary school pupils. However,

mediated pathways were found to differ depending on experience of exclusion, with the role of supportive home environments shown to be particularly salient for school-excluded pupils. Additionally, our investigation highlighted the potential for nurturing social environmental experiences to provide a warm and stable basis for young people already excluded from school to engage in a process of self-development. Encouragingly, our findings show that alternative education settings, and extra-curricular work involving drama and theatre, can provide a social context within which intrinsic motivation, and mastery and achievement experiences can be enjoyed, such that a process of self-development occurs via changes in perceived self-discrepancies and possible selves and the discovery and expression of an authentic self.

In this way, our findings support a model of disaffection that has at its core an emphasis on the importance of need-fulfilling environmental experiences in order to achieve positive behavioural and emotional outcomes, bridged by a complex interplay of socio-motivational factors that underpin self-development. This programme of work provides a strong basis for future work to systematically examine pathways to youth disaffection by building on the links between constructs found in our work, and to further examine the potential for extra-curricular arts-based programmes to empower marginalised young people in building positive trajectories for self-development.