

An investigation into the impact of SEMH needs on student motivation, and how best the motivation of these students can be supported.

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Context

In the past number of years, the school has exceeded the national average for students gaining five GCSE's in A*-C, however in recent years this statistic has been dropping.

The school has been trialling several initiatives to try and increase motivation in the students.

I am concerned that my schools' recent focus on raising our Progress Eight score has diverted their focus from student well-being, placing these already vulnerable students in a more precarious position.

Questions guiding the literature review

- What are the current attitudes on student motivation generally?
- How do these attitudes relate to students with SEMH needs?
- What is the impact of SEMH needs on Intrinsic motivation?

Summary of literature

What are the current attitudes on student motivation generally?

Student context and previous experience are vitally important to think through when considering what effects student motivation. (Galloway,2014) (Campbell,2011)

Difference between intrinsic and motivation- Most current initiatives are focussed on promoting extrinsic motivation, however this has been proved to have no long term effect on positive motivation- more of a behaviour management strategy. (Anderson&Peart,2016).

Difficulty of enhancing intrinsic motivation- positive teacher relationship (Opdenakker,2011). and learning environment can help (Rogers,2003P396).

How do these attitudes relate to students with SEMH needs?

feelings of community and belonging had a positive impact on the mental health of students, particularly evident on their future aspirations. (Frostick etal,2018).

Context- From lesson to lesson this changes, and students with SEN and SEMH needs can struggle to adapt at the same speed as other students and so are already at a disadvantage (McDermott, 1993).

What is the impact of SEMH needs on Intrinsic motivation?

Appraisal theory as an important way of considering the effect of emotion on motivation. Smith and Kirby define appraisal as 'The elicitor of emotions' (P211) and state its importance in differentiating emotions (Smith&Kirby,2001).

close link between students having strong self-efficacy and their ability to accurately appraise situations and emotional responses.

Scher & Osterman argue that anxiety is a notable reason that students procrastinate,

Marsh's theory of moral career- students who, on the surface may come across as completely unmotivated, may in fact be highly motivated, but suffering from test anxiety and unwilling to accept their perceived failure at school, and so will procrastinate in order to kick against the established system.

Conclusions drawn from literature

Supporting and maintaining intrinsic motivation in students with SEMH- due to their mental state their ability to appraise situations and required emotional responses can be skewed.

Teacher awareness of context- aware of the contexts from which learners are entering their lesson is also vital in ensuring these students can be best supported

One issue which has become very clear in my survey of the literature is how little the voices of SEMH students are represented in the research. The insight they could give would be vital in building support for these students.

Questions guiding research

What are SEMH students' perceptions of their motivation and the impact that their SEMH needs have on it?

What are students with SEMH issues positive and negative experiences of motivation, and do they perceive this having an effect on their attainment?

In what ways do SEMH students believe teachers can best support their motivation?

Methodology

Qualitative data gathered from students who fall into the category of SEMH need.

I used a series of five statements as opening questions, asking students whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements and how far they did so. (PISA,2015) The statements were as follows;

- I want top grades in all or most of my classes.
- I want to be able to select from among the best opportunities available to me whenever I leave school.
- I want to be the best at whatever I do.
- I see myself as an ambitious person.
- I want to be one of the best students in my class.

Students were selected from among children that I teach who I am aware have SEMH needs. They all suffer from anxiety as well as having other SEMH needs. There was an equal gender balance in the group, and one student was selected from years seven, eight, nine and eleven.

Student context

Dylan is a year seven student. In primary school he had a strong record of school refusal and absence. Dylan has suffered significant childhood trauma. He spent a large portion of his childhood in a foreign country and was in the care system there. He returned to the UK near the end of primary school. Dylan suffers from attachment disorder and anxiety as well as having some SEN needs linked to cognition and learning.

Warren is in year eight. Just before the beginning of secondary school his father committed suicide, which has triggered a lot of Warren's SEMH needs. Warren has a record of poor behaviour and violence towards other students and is frequently excluded and isolated as a result. He has been working with CHAMS since the beginning of year seven. His primary SEMH need is anxiety, however all teaching staff are aware of his grief which displays itself in the form of anger at times. Warren is a low prior attaining student and is in a bottom set class for English.

Hazel is a year nine student. She has struggled with anxiety since year seven, however it has become worse this year as she has begun to work for her GCSE's. She has a time out card which she uses to leave lessons when she is feeling overwhelmed in order to go and see the student support manager. Her primary need is anxiety.

Molly is a year eleven student. Molly has struggled with anxiety since year seven. She struggles to engage in the support that is offered to her, as this makes her feel more anxious. Molly is a high prior attaining student and is in the top set for most of her classes. Molly often needs to leave lessons in order to calm herself down and has developed personal strategies to do so.

Findings

What are SEMH students' perceptions of their motivation and the impact that their SEMH needs have on it?

Concerning the first 3 statements all students gave positive answers apart from Hazel who was less coherent.

Me: 'I want top grades in all or most of my classes'...

Hazel: Em... Well I want to get at least a pass... So I want to do well... but not like... I don't really care if I'm not the best...

Me: So would you say that you mostly agree with that statement?

Hazel: Yeah mostly agree.

throughout answering all of these statements it became clear that Hazel was very conscious of treading the line between doing well but not drawing attention to herself.

In answer to my fifth statement which was 'I want to be one of the best students in my class.' The responses continued to be mixed. Both of the boys stated that they agreed with the statement, which is interesting considering their at times disengaged and defiant behaviour in lessons.

Molly: emm.. not so much

Me: Ok so it's more about you being motivated for yourself rather than being in competition with others.

Molly: Yeah I don't care about being the best of the best, I just want to be the best I can be.

Both girls are high prior attaining students who it would be assumed are therefore highly motivated to succeed. These responses are also interesting when considering those of the boys who, due to SEN need and external circumstances are low attaining students, however, still have the desire to succeed.

What are SEMH students' perceptions of their motivation and the impact that their SEMH needs have on it?

After the completion of the questions, each student spoke about the potential impact their SEMH needs had on their motivation.

Three out of the four interviewed students responded with very self-aware ideas about their own motivation, seeming to focus more on their intrinsic motivation.

Warren presented his ideas on this matter with a clear focus on his external surroundings and specifically how he perceives his teachers to be the defining factor on his motivation.

Me: Ok great, so tell me about your motivation generally. Would you say that you are a motivated student? Or not really that motivated.

Warren:.. Some lessons

Me: Ok, what do you think makes a difference between lessons where you are motivated and the ones where you aren't?

Warren: The teacher

Me: Is there anything that can stop you from being as motivated as you could be?

Warren: ehh... how the teachers respect you.

What are students with SEMH issues positive and negative experiences of motivation, and do they perceive this having an effect on their attainment?

Three out of the four of the students gave subject specific examples of where they felt least motivated (Maths and Science) For different reasons.

Hazel was the anomaly again stating that her positive or negative motivation was always to do with her anxiety levels on that day.

When considering examples of being positively motivated, Molly, Warren and Dylan again all similarly selected practical subjects as where they felt most motivated:

Me: So having said that, what subjects do you feel most motivated in?

Molly: Probably music and drama, again it's a smaller environment, and I really enjoy the subjects, and even though they are still hard, I find them more of a challenge than a difficulty.

Me: Ok, can you give me an example of a lesson where you are really motivated?

Warren: DT...Because... You get to do stuff... And you kinda get to do what you want, like the teacher lets you choose what you do sometimes... And he like helps you out and stuff... and is nice.

Dylan: I think... DT I get more motivated because Grandad always likes doing things... He had twenty-six sheds... And he knew what was in every single one!

In what ways do SEMH students believe teachers can best support their motivation?

When considering this question with the students, they held a range of different views. Once again Hazel, and this time Dylan held a more intrinsic view of their own motivation and anxiety.

Warren seems to believe, as afore mentioned that his lack of motivation is less connected to his SEMH issues and more connected with the teachers and their treatment of him.

Me: Ok, anything about certain teachers that might help you feel more motivated when you're not feeling great?

Warren: yeah when teachers help me out... like give me more help with my work... Or give me more time to do my work.

Me: Do you think you'd like it if teachers came and checked in with you during the lesson?

Warren: Yeah like... had a bit of a chat?

Molly is equipped with the strategies to regroup when she is feeling anxious and demotivated, and after spending a short time outside the room is able to reenter the lesson and work in a highly motivated way.

Analysis- What are SEMH students' perceptions of their motivation and the impact that their SEMH needs have on it?

Boy's positive answer to the statement about wanting to be the best student in their class despite both of their track records of poor, defiant and disengaged behaviour links closely to Marsh's theory in Galloways chapter in Daniels and Edward's book.

The girls, two high prior attaining students, both stated that they didn't necessarily want to be the best as this would involve being noticed, but simply the best they could be. This relates to Akpur's theory on social anxiety leading students towards procrastination behaviours (Akpur,2017) which here could be considered as their reluctance to actively participate in lessons.

Warren did not believe that his motivation had any link to his self-efficacy, but was dependent on the teacher, links to Opdenakker's findings that positive student teacher relationships can help to protect a student's intrinsic motivation (Opdenakker,2011). I feel that Warren's conclusion that he is solely motivated by the teacher may also be linked to his struggles to cognitively appraise certain situations (Smith&Kirby,2001), and as such build up a negative perception of that teacher and lesson which as Bruner states, is very difficult to change (Bruner,1960).

What are students with SEMH issues positive and negative experiences of motivation, and do they perceive this having an effect on their attainment?

All students mentioned that they felt that science was an academically challenging subject for them, and Smith and Kirby also state that low self-efficacy can lead to inaccurate appraisal and thus a disproportionate emotional response (Smith&Kirby,2001).

Molly, Dylan and Warren's observation that they felt more positively motivated in practical subjects aligns with Mercer's view that where students are allowed to hone their problem-solving skills and curiosity leads to more positive student outcomes (Mercer,2008).

In what ways do SEMH students believe teachers can best support their motivation?

- Students did not really seem to feel that teacher support could benefit their motivation when they are struggling. Whilst teachers were aware of the possible issues facing students with SEMH needs, they were not in any way equipped to support them (Allen etal,2017).
- Warren's consistent attributions of his motivation to his relationship with his teachers does concur with Opdenakker's statement that teacher friendliness can be a massive predictor of motivation (Opdenakker,2011).

Conclusion

Intrinsic motivation is fragile in SEMH students.

Adjustment time between lessons and emotional appraisal, particularly where core subjects are concerned.

Requirement for further teacher education.

Implications

Danger of the assumption that low prior attaining, and seemingly disengaged students are actually poorly motivated.

Teacher awareness of these students