Investigating Research Module Coursework – Dissertation Proposal

Statement of interest

Academic success is highly valued in UK society, the current education secretary Michael
Gove (2013) has vocally called for more "rigor" in the education system to ensure that GCSE
qualifications "set expectations that match and exceed those in the highest-performing
jurisdiction" (DfE, 2013). This emphasis on academic success can lead to fears of academic
failure which can undermine pupil confidence (Jackson, 2010). Jackson also raises the issue
of fear of social failure and the delicate balancing act students engage in while trying to
maintain their desire to fit in but also their desire to do well academically. This suggests that
the students who can balance these fears are those most likely to achieve academic success.

 This study aims to explore similarities and differences in academic and social fears of
students in different classes that are set by ability, and to explore the impact these fears
have on their approach to learning and on their attainment. My interest in this is a result of
teaching a number of set classes within the same year group. The first three sets all
appeared to have similar levels of academic success in primary school and all appear to
maintain the same goal of academic success. With the same teacher, resources and
curriculum their willingness to demonstrate the behaviours associated with academic
success differ greatly. Is this because the students want to fit in? Are the students in the
top set just better at balancing their social and academic concern? Do they fear academic
failure more than social failure or is there no link?

Literature review

Jackson (2010) begins to explore the relationship between student fears of academic and social failure in secondary school. In doing so she is trying to highlight the difficulties student face in trying to avoid failing in either of these competing, but important areas. Watkins (2010) believes that focus on academic achievement in what he describes as "performance orientation" can have a detrimental effect on academic achievement. Jackson seems to agree, suggesting that "anxious children perform worse in classrooms where the emphasis is on academic achievement" (Jackson, 2010, p. 43). This conclusion has been reached through analysis of interviews and questionnaires given to students across 6 secondary schools in England. These seem to demonstrate a high percentage of students that express fear of academic failure and this expression of fear is further supported by analysis of literature from a number of sources. There is however, little evidence offered of what constitutes academic failure for these students or of how successful they have actually been.

Using literature, a large number of questionnaires and 153 student interviews, Jackson argues that the reasons students fear academic failure are complex and can vary according to class but are also influenced by perceived parental expectations and the effect their anxieties about failing to achieve can have (Jackson, 2010, p. 46). This is supported by others including Leondari & Gonida,(2007). There is however little discussion on the actual consequences of academic failure, or whether this fear has any consequences on performance other than the suggestion that "fear is generally (though not always) detrimental" (pg 40). Jackson selected schools that included a mixture of student backgrounds in terms of social class, gender and ethnicity to ensure a representative

sample. Jackson (2006) reveals that the data collection was carried out mainly on year 9 students about to participate in externally assessed SATs examinations. While important for the school, these examinations do not result in any qualifications which may be a limiting factor in relation to this research as students about to participate in more high stakes qualification based exams such as GCSEs may experience academic and social fears differently.

 In regards to social success and failure Jackson mainly relies on literature to conclude that fear of being excluded from their peer group is also important to many students. In addition students describe the consequences of social failure as being very negative including isolation and bullying (2010, p. 47). Jacksons claim that the use of the "dominant versions of masculinity or feminity" (2010, p. 47) to achieve social success is supported by the work of Francis, Skelton and Read (2009).

Jackson suggests that this leaves students with a dilemma of how to avoid failing in both categories when they seem to compete with each other. She goes onto argue that some students may be better at balancing this, or may be better at hiding the work they do towards avoiding academic failure, while some may simply sacrifice academic success to try and ensure academic success.   This is supported by other authors who describe the potential impact of prioritising one fear over the other. Academic success is valuable in social circles at school, however if it is perceived that this is achieved through hard work rather than ability, students can fail to be accepted by their peer group and this can have a negative impact on their self-image (Reay, 2006).   This can lead to students employing strategies that handicap their own performance (Gadbois & Sturgeon, 2011) such as not preparing for tests as a result of negative attitudes towards their success potential. This

would seem to suggest that for some students the fear of social failure is impacting on their academic success.

Jackson recognises that this article is limited in its scope of the impact of these fears, how they are sustained and how we address them. What she does do is give a detailed and well argued account of the different fears that students experience. In doing so, there is a question raised regarding the impacts of these balancing acts and whether or not academic streaming may have an impact on which fear students prioritise once in a specific group.

So is it possible for students to achieve a balance between academic and social success? In related work Francis, Skelton and Read explored strategies or practices that high achieving and popular students employed to balance their academic and social success (Francis, et al., 2009). By observing and interviewing year 8 students who were measured to be successful academically and socially across nine coeducational state schools, the authors suggest that the students most successful at balancing academic and social success show "productions of gendered subjectivity within the classroom context" (p 330). Pupils were observed using their "physical appearance and attention to aesthetics" to reassert gendered behaviour, which fellow students described in questionnaires as reasons for their popularity.   The authors use observation and literature to argue that the time spent on non-pedagogic interactions, despite being engaged and participating in tasks set by the teacher suggests to fellow class members that they achieve effortlessly (pg 332) which further enhances their social success.

The observed students seemed to put a great deal of time and effort into maintaining their social interactions compared with the high achieving but not popular students. As identified by the authors there is a limitation in these findings in that while academically successful at

this stage there may be long-term decline in academic achievement.   The selection of students in year 8 was made because literature identified this as an age of accelerated disengagement (p.320) but further research involving older students, participating in high stakes examinations would be a valuable further investigation in this area to see if this added pressure impacts on fear of failure. In addition, if these behaviours of trying to make work seem effortless have become habit, do they result in academic difficulty further up the school where the ability to persist and overcome difficulties is important.

This study has been successful in identifying common behaviours of academically and socially successful individuals, and by highlighting that some students "articulated the tension between high achievement and popularity" (p331) does hint at possible fear of failure. It does not however, contribute to an understanding of the motivations or fears of students trying to balance their fear.   Perhaps more importantly the article leaves the question of why some students fail to achieve success in both their academic studies and social standing and if there are any patterns in prioritising one over the other.

The impact of the fears described above and more importantly how successfully students balance and prioritise these fears may lead to different approaches to learning. While the above research has looked at what these fears are and to some extent how they may impact on behaviours or practices of students, it does not look at the potential similarities and difference within and between sets of students. Further exploration of this may give some insight into different fears within groups of students which may allow embedding or challenging of behaviours that effect learning and attainment.

Methodology

By looking at how social and academic fears impact on approaches to learning and attainment in classrooms, this research can be placed in the field of educational research. A qualitative study will be carried out to explore student academic and social fears and how, if at all, these impact on their learning. The empirical setting of this research will be in an 11-18 inner-city secondary school in London. Within this school there is a strong focus on academic standards and high achievement, the school employs setting based on previous attainment in core subjects.

A qualitative approach based on Glaser and Straus (1967) grounded theory has been chosen to help move beyond a description of the fears experienced by students to the development of a theory (Creswell, 2012) to explain how they impact on student approaches to learning and their attainment. Interviews with students will be used to explore these issues as developing an understanding will require listening to and examining the views and feelings of the students experiencing these fears, "Grounded theory places emphasis on allowing the empirical setting to be heard" (Dowling, 2013) and so this approach will help better understand the impact of academic and social fear in different sets.

Focus groups for each set were considered as a method to collect data because they would allow for more individuals to participate in a limited amount of interview time and may be useful for students who are more hesitant to talk. They would also provide the opportunity to investigate any similarities within the sets and contrast responses between sets. However, students concerned with "social failure" may try to say the right thing to fit in rather than share their honest concerns or the group may be dominated by the most socially successful student. As such, one to one interviews have been chosen as the most

suitable method of data collection as they will allow the exploration of the complex issues in more depth (Dowling & Brown, 2010) but also provide a non-threatening environment.

The interviews will be unstructured with open ended questions to allow the students the opportunity to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings on two themes, firstly about academic failure and any pressure associated with it and secondly how important they feel fitting in with their peers is (social success).   These are potentially sensitive topics that students may not feel comfortable sharing with a teacher in the school. In light of this, the interview will begin by asking the students to describe a situation where they feel they have experienced success in school with probes to encourage them to elaborate if necessary. The interview will then continue with discussion about social fears. If participants do not share their thoughts on academic fears and pressures they will be prompted to share their experience of when they did not achieve as highly as they had hoped or felt they could, how they had approached learning and why they had done so. To prompt discussion on social fears they may be asked to share an occasion when they felt excluded from their peer group, what reasons they thought had caused this and how it made them feel. Should they still be reluctant they may be asked to describe another student who they feel is excluded, why, how that would make them feel and if they think there is any reason why they are not excluded.

Dowling and Brown (2010) highlight the potential effects of the student-teacher relationship on the responses given by the students. There is a possibility that students may try to say what they think I want to hear rather than what they actually feel. It is therefore important that as well as demonstrating sensitivity to the issues around relationship between

interviewer and interviewee, that the purpose of the interview is made clear and that the

student is made to feel comfortable to share their thoughts.

Sampling, data collection and analysis

An element of theoretical sampling will be used to collect data but there will also be a

"quota sample" (Dowling & Brown, 2010, p. 28). To allow for a comparison to take place

between students it will be necessary to interview a number of students from different sets.

Year 11 science sets 1 and 2 have been chosen as these students could be considered to

have a similar academic ability but different levels of academic success. These students will

already have completed some GCSE examinations and so will have some idea of how

academically successful they have been and finally, having taught both of these groups I

have developed a relationship with these groups and have access to them.

Initially a student from set 2 will be interviewed. They will be selected by comparing

predicted attainment with actual attainment, a student who could be considered to be

underachieving marginally but who appears to be popular among their peers. To establish

their level of popularity an anonymous questionnaire asking questions such as "which

student do you like most?" and "who do you think others in the class would say is the most

popular?". This is to ensure that the student selected is based on popularity amongst peers

rather than the perceptions of the classroom teacher. The interview will be audio recorded

and transcribed. Upon completion of the interview, memoing will be used to record ideas

on the emerging theory from the interview and the process of coding will begin. Theoretical

sampling is "directed towards the generation and development of conceptual theory as

opposed to creating a descriptive account" (Brekenridge & Jones, 2009) and so based on

theories developed from the first interview students will be selected for the second

interview and so forth, returning to students to fill in the gaps and to elaborate on the theory being developed (Creswell, 2012, p. 85). Time constraints will limit the number of interviews possible, however by initially focussing on 3 students from each class, should allow for time to re interview students as new categories emerge in the developing theory and potentially expand the number of students involved to 8 in total. While reaching a point of saturation of the core categories is the ultimate goal, it is probable that within the time constraints theoretical saturation will not be achieved.

Data analysis will begin with the first interview. Upon completion of the full transcript memo writing will take place to allow the beginning of formation of codes of information. Memo writing is an important strategy employed which will aim to provide the outline of emerging concepts in general terms (Dowling & Brown, 2010, p. 86). This will allow the development and identification of open codes of broad categories within the data collected from interview. In this process the transcripts and memos will be reviewed to "provide insight into specific coding categories that relate to or explain the central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012, p. 196). These emerging open codes will be revisited and compared using memos in subsequent interview analysis to describe and illustrate the codes. This constant comparison will also allow movement towards the development of a number of core categories. These will be the major categories that arise from the transcript.   As more data is collected it will be selectively coded in relation to the core categories identified. I will continue to code and constantly compare data to core categories as described by Johnston (2008) to ensure the core categories are fully developed and explained. This will then lead to a theoretical model of how the mixture of academic and social fear impact on learning in different sets and a hypothesis will be developed to interrelate the categories developed.

Ethical issues

Ethical issues should be considered carefully in any research. I intend to adhere to the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) ethical guidelines. Before beginning this piece of research I will gain permission from the school Principal involved and obtain informed consent from all students involved. As these students will be in year 11 some may be over the age of 16 and so parental consent may not be required, however to ensure consistency in the way students are treated I will send an email or letter to all parents (depending on the preferred mode of communication by the school) informing them of the research, how it will be used and to whom it will be reported and providing the opportunity to withdraw if desired. All participants will also be informed of their right to withdraw at any time, at which point all information from their interviews will be destroyed.

Discussing failure may be a potentially sensitive topic for some students and families and while complete anonymity is not possible when only two classes are being used, names will be changed to respect the privacy of individuals. In addition, all participants and the school will be offered a copy of the final dissertation.

Contingencies

One possible difficulty that may be encountered is students changing school, illness, withdrawal during the research or students struggling to balance workload around examinations. Should this happen alternative students will need to be found within the

same classes, or within the equivalent classes on the opposite side of the year group. There are two set 1s, 2 etc.

Year 11 is an important year in academic study and finding time to conduct the appropriate number of interviews with students who will be busy completing controlled assessments and revision classes may prove difficult. Should this begin to become a problem for too many, students from year 10 will be selected, while they will not all have the experience of being presented for GCSE examinations they will have been involved in internal school examinations, will have end of key stage 3 teacher assessed levels and students in the top set will have participated in at least GCSE science examinations.

Professional development

 I hope this research will give me a greater understanding of factors that affect learning and performance in the classroom, in particular fears that students have and what they do to try and address them. With knowledge of how fears develop I may be able to alter my practice to try to reduce the impact of both their social and academic fears and so help students develop more confidence in their learning. If there are patterns or links between the relationship of fear and the sets students are assigned it may be possible as a department of whole school to develop strategies to ensure that the impact on student attainment is minimised.

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