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## REVIEW

# Disadvantage, educational social mobility and barriers to student engagement: An exploration of the Psychosocial and Academic Trust Alienation theory across educational practice

Caroline Sarah Jones

Health and Education Faculty, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, M15 6GX, UK



**Correspondence to:** Caroline Sarah Jones, Education Faculty, Manchester Metropolitan University, Brooks Building, Birley Fields Campus, 53 Bonsall Street, Manchester, M15 6GX, UK;  
E-mail: [c.jones@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:c.jones@mmu.ac.uk)

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**Abstract:** This article explores the original concept of the Psychosocial and Academic Trust Alienation (PATA) theory across the education sector, specifically focusing on barriers to student engagement for disadvantaged students and educational social mobility. It begins with an examination of the terms 'disadvantage and educational social mobility' followed by a discussion of the context of the educational experiences of disadvantaged students aged 0-19 years old in the UK. An exploration and definition of the PATA theory and the subsequent links to barriers to student engagement in educational practice is then presented. Subsequently, age-appropriate case vignettes demonstrating how the PATA theory can be identified or experienced in practice are presented. Thereafter, practical teaching and learning strategies based on the concepts of the PATA theory for educators, leadership teams and Governments can be found. These strategies aim to stimulate educational pedagogy when supporting the most disadvantaged students in education. Therefore, the contribution of this article to the field of educational psychology is firstly, the acknowledgement of the presence of the PATA theory across educational age ranges, secondly it provides insights into the educational psychological barriers to engagement for the disadvantaged student demographic, and thirdly it proposes practical strategies for supporting disadvantaged student progression thus contributing to educational social mobility.

**Keywords:** educational psychology, student engagement, social mobility, PATA theory

## 1 Introduction

I have long been interested in the educational outcomes of the most disadvantaged students in the UK in comparison to their more affluent peers and the links to the wider impact of Government Social Policy. Educational Social Mobility policy has fascinated me as an educator for my entire career and more specifically the 'educational gap' between differing socio-economic households (SES) ([Social Mobility Commission, 2014](#); [HM Government 2021; 2021a; 2021b](#); [Eyles et al., 2022](#); [Marmot et al., 2020](#); [Maslen, 2019](#)).

Working with children and families in Early Years, Primary, Secondary and Further Education for over 20 years has also provided me with experience and insight across the 0-19 age range of the education sector. Later in my career I moved on to teaching in Higher Education on Early Years, Childhood Studies, Education and Health and Social Care programmes. Combining this experience and my academic research has led me to identify and develop the educational psychological concept of the PATA theory ([Jones, 2021](#)), which will be explored in more detail within this article. Knowledge of the PATA theory could help educators to review the educational psychology of disadvantaged students through a new lens with the intention to improve educational progress and thus social mobility for young people in the UK. The concept and intricacies of the PATA theory and the differing educational systems may also be of interest to other countries who share similar systems and demographics. Understanding of the PATA theory could also aid educators supporting students who are disengaging from education or presenting with alienating psychological behaviours and thus aims to improve equality.

Ultimately, as an educator, I, along with many others, have a desire to be able to help students to progress across the life course via the educational systems available. However, students can only do this by engaging in their teaching, learning and progression journey. For some students, this is a complex expectation and at times can feel overwhelming, particularly for those students from disadvantaged backgrounds ([Jones & Nangah, 2020](#)). Understanding this is important if commitment to educational social mobility in the UK is to be addressed effectively.

Education systems do continue to demonstrate their commitment to the disadvantaged student demographic via pupil premium funding and free school meals, however, the educational gap continues to widen ([HM Government 2022](#); [Social Mobility Commission, 2014](#); [Marmot et al.,](#)

2020). Insight into new and alternative theories and concepts, such as the PATA theory, may provide an alternative approach to the complexities of disadvantaged societal groups.

### So where did the PATA theory begin?

During my career and whilst undertaking various educational roles, I have noticed repeated patterns of psychological behaviours from students, which seemed to be pivotal to their ongoing educational success or failure. These behaviours have been closely associated with the students' self-concept and self-esteem (psychosocial) and appeared to be affecting their ability to trust in the educational systems within which they were located. From this point, I began to develop an interest in investigating students' psychological needs more closely, in particular, exploring the interplay between these factors and already existing and established theories of alienation (Jones, 2017; Mann 2001; Henry et al., 2012; Reeve, 2006; Skinner, Kindermann & Furrer, 2009; cited in Earl et al., 2016).

## 1.1 Key terms

To start, let us explore the terms '*disadvantage and social mobility*' in relation to education in more detail, to unpick what these mean and lay the grounding for how they are to be understood for the purposes of this article. These terms and the key issues link strongly to the PATA theory and, therefore, it is crucial that they are understood clearly from the outset (Jones & Nangah, 2020; Jones, 2021; Jones, 2022).

### Disadvantage

The term '*disadvantage*' encompasses school children in the UK who are currently eligible for Government funded free school meals or who have qualified for free school meals in the previous six years (Department for Education (DfE), 2021; 2015). This means these students are predominantly from households with low socio-economic status (SES), some having experienced generational poverty and disadvantage (Social Mobility Commission, 2014; Marmot et al., 2020). As of June 2021 (HM Government, 2021), approximately 20.8% of school pupils in the UK qualified for Free School Meals (FSM), an increase of 3% from the previous year, indicating growing societal disadvantage. The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014) highlight the significant gaps in educational achievement between those at the opposing ends of the economic demographic, with disadvantaged students performing least well compared to their more affluent peers. This educational gap has also been further compounded by the Covid-19 Global pandemic (DfE, 2021; EEF, 2021).

Disadvantaged students have the power to succeed educationally with improved psychological understanding, support and relationship-based practice from education systems and educators. Understanding the student's educational psychological status could contribute to more successful outcomes, such as increased engagement, educational achievement, and completion of qualifications or programmes of study. Ultimately, this will also contribute to the educational social mobility and inequality quest, and this theme is the driving force behind the PATA theory.

### Social mobility

It is well documented that children from more affluent households are more likely to enter into higher paid job roles by achieving higher qualification levels, leading to stronger economic prospects in adulthood (Social Mobility Commission, 2014; Eyles et al., 2022). Meanwhile, statistics report that children from low SES households tend to do much less well than their more affluent peers, affecting their ability to achieve the same qualification levels and future job prospects (Social Mobility Commission, 2014; Eyles et al., 2022; HM Government, 2022). The term '*social mobility*' refers to the economic inequalities experienced by children in education and the Government's plans and strategies to address these inequalities. Economic disadvantage in the UK still appears to be a growing problem, despite strategic funding and schools providing innovative interventions. However, for children in education the achievement gap between those from low SES households and their more affluent peers is increasing, heightening inequalities and affecting long term life prospects. *Social mobility* in education is focused on how best to 'narrow the educational gap', to reduce inequalities for disadvantaged children and young people and thus improve long term economic well-being and life chances (The Equality Trust, 2022).

It would appear that education is best placed to drive change in the quest for equality and to improve *social mobility* progress for those students from low SES households (Eyles et al., 2022; Jones, 2022). However, it would also appear that despite current initiatives, policy and educational practices, there is still some way to go in the quest for educational equality for disadvantaged groups in society. This is especially so in the wake of the impact of the Covid-19 Global pandemic which has further hindered this vulnerable groups (HM Government, 2021a). It would seem practical, therefore, to explore the social mobility issues from a different

standpoint and through alternative lenses, which is how the PATA theory initially originated and came to life via empirical research and investigation (Jones & Nangah, 2020; Jones, 2021; Jones, 2022).

## 1.2 Brief context of education in the UK

In 2014, I undertook research into the effectiveness of the UK Government's Pupil Premium funding (DfE, 2021), which was introduced in 2011 and allocated to the Primary (5-11 years) and Secondary (11-16 year) school sector to support disadvantaged pupils' educational progress. Early Years (0-5 years) Pupil Premium Funding was not introduced in the UK until 2015 (DfE, 2015a), in the form of 15 hours per week free childcare for families from low SES backgrounds.

### Early years (0-5 years)

The findings of my 2014 research identified that early intervention in a child's life is key, in fact the earlier the intervention in a disadvantaged child's life the better their potential long term educational outcomes. In addition, this research also identified that inadequate speech and language skills was an additional barrier to onward educational engagement and subsequent future learning ability. If a child moves from Nursery to Primary school and is still not able to verbalise basic words and sentences, this will severely affect how the child can engage in the teaching and learning delivered in the Primary sector and onward into the Secondary sector. Subsequently for those children from disadvantaged backgrounds who display poor speech and language ability their educational starting point is immediately hampered (Bercow, 2018). This also makes it harder for disadvantaged children to catch-up to their more affluent peers, leading to this demographic potentially falling behind right from the start of their educational journey. This, of course, has a knock-on effect for the child's onward educational progress and thus impacting on the opportunity to improve their social mobility status via the education system. Research has evidenced that children with lower speech and language skills can be directly linked to their family and generational SES backgrounds (Bercow, 2018; Gascoigne & Gross, 2017).

### Primary (5-11 year) and secondary school (11-16 years)

It is also well known that the Primary school sector provides an initial nurturing educational experience for disadvantaged pupils and additional support staff are employed, enabling small group work learning opportunities and bespoke educational interventions. Primary schools are also at liberty to spend their Pupil Premium Funding allocation (DfE, 2021) based on the needs of their student demographic on resources such as Teaching Assistants. However, during the Secondary school years, it is a very different story for disadvantaged pupils. Stevens (2018, p781) found that '... a lack of nurture later at secondary school was problematic' particularly for children from high-need families. In 2021 I conducted research into Social Mobility in the UK in the context of disadvantaged students in the Secondary school sector, identifying that disadvantaged pupils are at a higher risk of educational alienation due to the changes in expectations, educational systems, and teaching and learning styles (Jones, 2022). This research found that secondary schools are key establishments to capture and drive change in educational progress for disadvantaged pupils and thus influence educational social mobility in the UK. You could argue that it is necessary for children to grow and develop skills and independence throughout their educational journey. For example, the expectations of children in the Primary school years are very different to the expectations children experience in the Secondary school years in terms of autonomy, organisation, engagement and independence. The changes correspond with the child's physiological and cognitive developments as they grow older, which sounds like the right order of things in an ideal world. However, for those of you who work closely with children, young people or adults in the education system, you will know and understand many of the challenges that disadvantaged students have had to face, sometimes before they even step foot into the building. For some student's education can be a haven, an escape, a place to be individual and to flourish. Other students can have negative reactions to education systems, and it can feel that despite all the help and support provided, those students choose to alienate themselves by displaying destructive behaviours, self-sabotaging their own potential and progression (Jones & Nangah, 2020; Jones, 2021; Jones, 2022).

It can be very difficult for teachers and educators to know how to support the student towards positive successful educational outcomes. Quite often these students begin to withdraw from their educational establishments or start demonstrating disengaging and alienating behaviours. If we, as educators are to drive change and improve pedagogical practice for students from low SES backgrounds, we must understand their individual, psychological status, and the influence of past, present and post traumatic experiences (Jones & Nangah, 2020). The PATA theory aims for education to view the child or student as an individual and to assess their educational psychological status in relation to their educational engagement and academic trust. This should

lead to adaption of pedagogical practice to support those students, to address recognised barriers to engagement. The PATA theory is rooted within an early intervention model and approach to educational difficulties.

#### **Further (16-25 years) and higher education (18+ years)**

Empirical research of the PATA theory was initially undertaken at a university setting, which was based within a Further Education college, attended entirely by widening participation students. The findings provided evidence of the presence of the PATA theory in educational practice (Jones, 2021), with 87% of the sample aligning with the theory. This empirical research provided insight into the psychological barriers to engagement for the disadvantaged student demographic. Specific classroom and assessment activities, relationships with teaching staff and peers, staff absences and staff turnover, were all barriers identified as having a significant impact on students' psychosocial and academic trust status. Scrutiny of the PATA theory led to practice strategies to foster and invest in trusting relationships and educational systems, to reduce barriers to student engagement and increase student success, by pro-actively committing to the educational social mobility agenda. The key findings can be comfortably transferred across education age groups who share similar demographics and disadvantaged student populations in the UK and internationally.

#### **Socio-Economy**

Marmot et al. (2020) report identified that due to the current socio-economic climate in the UK, Social Mobility progress via the education system will take at least five generations before improvements will be realised. This demonstrates that the current UK Social Mobility crisis needs urgent action if progress is to be made sooner (Marmot et al., 2020). In addition, it would be prudent for educators to assume that for low SES children, their individual psychological status may be affected due to their experiences of poverty, disadvantage, possible traumatic experiences, and subsequent inequality (Baker et al., 2014; Jones & Nangah, 2020).

#### **Key points**

To summarise this section of this review article, the following key points have been identified:

Key Point 1: For disadvantaged children Early intervention is vital and Early Speech, Language and communication skills are key to influence longer term educational engagement and ongoing progress.

Key Point 2: Educational settings are crucial environments to drive change for disadvantaged pupils and thus critical in the quest for educational equality and social mobility.

Key Point 3: Educators and educational systems need to understand the impact of the student's SES background recognising any interconnected influences of trauma.

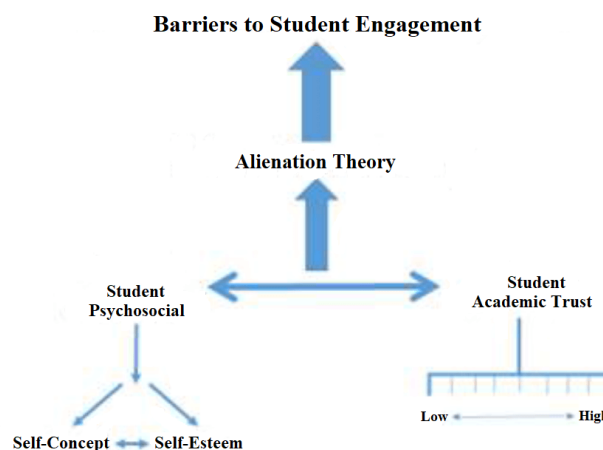
Key Point 4: Disadvantaged children need stronger nurturing pedagogical practices within the Secondary school context.

Key Point 5: Secondary school is a specific 'pinch point' in time where students seem most vulnerable in terms of disengagement, where the PATA theory may be able to support educators and students most effectively especially for re-engagement.

## **2 Definition of the PATA theory**

Now let us explore the different elements that make up the PATA theory in more detail. The PATA theory suggests that an individual student's self-concept levels and self-esteem levels (psychosocial), can affect a student's ability to trust in their educational abilities, systems and establishments. In other words, if there are large disparities between a student's self-concept and self-esteem levels, this can interfere with the student's ability to trust in the educational systems within which they are placed, affecting engagement. For these students it is harder for them to complete their programmes of study as they alienate themselves and pull away from their education because they may have lost trust in either the systems, the staff, themselves, or the taught content. In addition, education systems can enforce alienation of students via behaviour management and exclusion practices (Jones, 2022), meaning that alienation can be owned by the student themselves or enforced by the practices of the educational systems within which they are placed. (see Figure 1)

The PATA theory suggests that students with smaller disparities between self-concept and self-esteem (psychosocial) generally present with higher levels of academic trust and thus



**Figure 1** 'The psychosocial and academic trust alienation theory' (Jones, 2021 p155)

present with positive engagement levels. This demonstrates that for these students' progression and achievement is more stable and successful. Now remember, this is the ultimate goal for an educator, we want and need students to progress and succeed so that they can go on to be able to apply for future job roles and contribute to society in the same way as their more affluent peers. The aim is to increase equality of opportunity for disadvantaged students embedded within education and to work towards breaking the chain of the effects of poverty and generational poverty (Marmot et al., 2020). Achieving this could contribute to improved social mobility especially for the most disadvantaged students. An educational win-win scenario for sure, however, if you work or are connected to the education sector, you will know that nothing can be that straight forward or simplistic especially when seeking to support disadvantaged children and their families (Eyles et al., 2022).

The next section of this article will explore the theory in more detail, so that a clear understanding can be gained. This is a complex idea applied to a complex demographic, but when it is well understood there is the scope to really make a difference to the educational outcomes of students from the Early Years right through to Higher Education and further into the lifelong learning sector.

The following elements of the PATAT theory are interconnected and will be explained in more detail as follows:

- (1) Alienation theory;
- (2) Psychosocial (Self-concept/Self-esteem);
- (3) Academic trust.

## 2.1 Alienation theory

Alienation can be identified when students present negative attitudes towards their educational experiences and the institution (Çağlar, 2012; 2013; 2013a). Commonly this can be recognised when students start to reduce attendance, display negative behaviours, disengage with available resources and support, and stop completing or participating in formative or summative assessments. Çağlar's (2012; 2013; 2013a) international research into alienation provides evidence that negative student attitudes create barriers to learning, engagement and thus student progression. The implication of alienation is significant for students within education and can affect feelings of community, continuation of education and completion of programmes of study (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Earl et al., 2016; 2017; Hascher & Hagenauer, 2010; Hascher & Hadjar, 2018; Henry et al., 2012; Marcin et al., 2019). This emphasises the importance and value of alienation theories in relation to barriers to student engagement across the education sector.

Furthermore, Ofsted (2008) states disaffected students, as those who demonstrate consistent and continual disruptions with challenging behaviours or alternatively those students who appear quiet, withdrawn and who do not participate in lessons. Fredericks (2014) and Henry et al. (2012) (cited in Earl et al., 2016 p32) identified that, 'disengaged pupils are one of the biggest difficulties that teachers face in school classrooms and can be an indicator of prolonged academic and social pupil problems'. Additionally, Reeve (2006), Skinner et al. (2009) (cited in

Earl et al. (2016)) reported that students who are disengaging demonstrate alienating behaviours in the classroom such as withdrawing from activities, being disruptive or giving up easily when presented with challenging tasks.

Interestingly, Hascher and Hagenauer's (2010) international research also found the incidence of alienation most significant in boys. In the 2019-2020 academic year, the DfE (2021a) reported school exclusions for boys as continuing to be three times higher than girls, with exclusion incidences rising significantly by 14 years old. Statistics show that pupil exclusions also continue to be higher for pupils who are entitled to FSM (DfE, 2021) or for those students with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Çağlar (2013) identified that student alienation towards education systems can significantly impede educational and government objectives. Furthermore, SES students who are excluded or absent from school regularly, disengaged or alienating from school could be in danger of being drawn into child exploitation or criminal county lines activity (Children's Society, 2022; Lamrhari et al., 2021). This reveals the additional detrimental impact of student alienation within education, signifying the importance of addressing these wider societal issues and where new theoretical concepts could prove beneficial strategically.

Earl et al. (2016) also found that despite the historical presence of alienating or disengaged student behaviours in the classroom, there was a distinct lack of theoretical comprehension in the educational field. Their study did not review students' individual psychological needs nor those from varying demographics such as disadvantage, SEN. Again, this highlights the necessity to view educational issues via alternative theories, and the PATA theory provides original scope to assess the individual student's alienation status by identifying barriers to engagement in relation to their educational psychological needs.

Recognising alienation theory in practice when working with children and young people would be the initial catalyst for the PATA theory assessment process to begin.

**Reflection Point:** *Students' feelings of alienation can increase or decrease in response to their learning environment, educational systems and relationships. To diminish students' feelings of educational alienation it is crucial to understand the student's individual self-concept and self-esteem psychological status, which is the next stage of the PATA theory and is outlined below. This is to try to understand the reasons why a student is choosing to alienate themselves from their education or disengage from their learning or to assess when school systems may be alienating a student. This recognition point provides opportunity for reflection and ultimately to design a bespoke educational plan to meet the needs of the individual student to move forwards. However, note that alienation can be owned by the student or enforced on the student via educational behaviour management practices.*

## 2.2 Psychosocial (Self-concept/Self-esteem)

Psychosocial theory relates to the interaction between an individual's psychological condition (student) and their social environment (education) (Howe, cited in Walker & Crawford, 2010). Furthermore, psychosocial, self-concept has a direct influence on individuals based on their experiences (Schaffer, 2000). For example, a student's involvement in their programme of study, receiving assessment results, feedback, academic expectations, and behaviour management practices can be related to emotions of accomplishment or failure, and can affect a student's subsequent feelings of aptitude or ineffectiveness. Schaffer (2010, p164) further explains psychosocial theory as when

... there is little discrepancy between the ideal and the perceived real self (self-concept), the individual will experience high self-esteem; where the discrepancy is great, low self-esteem is the result.

High and low self-esteem in students can manifest in response to many aspects within education, such as assessment results, feelings of integration within the school community, peer/teacher relationships and anxieties from specific types of assessments, for instance exams or completing homework, having the required equipment and outside emotional influences such as effects of economic status and the home environment.

**Reflection Point:** *The psychosocial element of the PATA theory focuses on the individual student's feelings of capability and confidence as a measure of their educational self-concept and self-esteem. The greater the disparity between students' capability/confidence (self-concept and self-esteem), the greater the negative impact on academic trust and student engagement displaying as alienation. This is important information, especially if you are wishing to support a student who is displaying alienating or disengaging behaviours. Looking more closely at the educational psychology of the*

*individual student can bring new insights into the issues being experienced by them presenting as alienation or disengagement.*

### 2.3 Academic trust

Ultimately, trust is considered as a two-way exchange between students and the education system within which they are placed. According to [Baier \(1991\)](#), ‘Trust is a notoriously vulnerable good, easily wounded and not at all easily healed’. This highlights the precariousness of success or failure based on the concept of trust within an educational context, demonstrating the need for careful consideration in relation to the disadvantaged student demographic, especially if educational social mobility is to succeed. [Lee et al. \(2019\)](#) add that students’ feelings of security are closely linked to how safe their teachers make them feel. [Parris et al. \(2015\)](#) found Trust-Based Relational Interventions beneficial when working with secondary school aged children. [Avery et al. \(2021\)](#) explore the Trust-Based Relational model in their systematic review of school-wide trauma-informed approaches, identifying those neurobiological traumatic experiences affecting the body’s stress reactions can have a significant effect on a young person’s physical and mental health, relationships, and behaviours. This highlights how additional influences can also affect a disadvantaged child’s educational engagement. It must be acknowledged that potentially children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds could have been exposed to higher levels of trauma or traumatic experiences ([Jones & Nangah, 2020](#)). [Thomas et al. \(2019\)](#) highlight the importance for teaching and school staff to understand the neurological science behind traumatic experiences and young people’s responses or behaviours in the school environment. [Thomas et al. \(2019, p426\)](#) identify the neurological responses of ‘... fight, flight and freeze response when a student perceives a threat to his or her safety’. They further add that this is crucial information for improving educators understanding when supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who may have experienced or be experiencing trauma.

[Marcin et al.’s \(2019\)](#) research found that positive student/teacher relationships were critical in the quest to reduce students’ feelings of educational alienation. They further identify that the reduction of alienation is very much dependent on mutual trust and fairness, adding that student/teacher relationships need to be based on ‘... transparent evaluation practices and respectful, appreciative, and supportive relationships ...’ (ibid, p47). [Lee et al. \(2019, p463\)](#) assert that ‘teacher trust has a positive impact on self-efficacy. While student trust has a positive impact on intrinsic motive...’. It would be prudent, to acknowledge that for disadvantaged students, there is the potential for higher levels of exposure to traumatic experiences that could ultimately further affect their ability to trust, suggesting that educational relationships are pivotal to students’ ongoing progress ([Jones & Nangah, 2020](#)). [García-Moya et al. \(2019, p1\)](#) identified that, ‘relationship building is not seen as a central aspect of effective teaching’ and that ‘relational pedagogy still receives less attention than subject knowledge and didactics in teacher training’. A peer [Power \(2022, p22\)](#), teenager reported that

Building trust can take ages... it can take a long time to get to know someone and open up especially about personal things. That trust takes seconds to crumble. When new workers come in and go all the time it’s hard.

This further reinforces the need to research, review and consider changes to pedagogy and teacher training to encompass the diverse needs of the disadvantaged student demographic. Trust is a key component of the PATA theory and building, maintaining and developing relationships needs to be at the heart of teaching practice.

***Reflection Point:** Trust is a crucial element of the PATA theory, without trust or when trust is broken between a student and their educational system, difficulties can be experienced, meaning the student will find it difficult to thrive, progress and achieve to their full potential and the institution will find it problematic trying to re-engage or connect with the student to aid their ongoing educational achievement. It is in the best interests of the student and the educational system to build trust. This is why it is critical to understand the individual student’s educational psychological status to find out what may be causing the educational barriers to student engagement, affecting alienation and ultimately disrupting or damaging academic trust. However, educators also need to understand the physiological impact of trauma on a student’s brain development and how this can also affect or influence students’ ability to trust.*

### 2.4 Psychosocial and academic trust alienation theory – PATA

It seems logical, therefore, to consider that a student’s individual educational psychosocial and academic trust status could be interconnected, particularly for disadvantaged students. Many of these students possibly present gaps between the ideal self and the perceived self ([Schaffer,](#)



2000) impacting on their ability to manage, at times, within the education systems they are placed within. This can then display as discrepancies between self-concept and self-esteem affecting ongoing educational progress and achievements. According to Mann (2001), Jones (2021; 2022) and Jones and Nangah (2020), discrepancies in self-concept and self-esteem can lead to barriers to student engagement and alienation affecting academic trust.

Self-concept can range from low to high, with the ability to move up or down in reaction to changing behaviours from other people, systems and environments. This is closely linked to the appraisal of the extent of the student's own failed experiences as a consequence of their own set standards (Schaffer, 2000). The suggestion of an interchangeable continuum leads to an assumption that there is scope for the student's psychosocial status to be increased or decreased dependent on their own view of themselves, but also in response to assessment by others. This point further relates with the psychosocial concept having a direct effect on trust.

Therefore, if trust is developed effectively with educational staff and systems, then this could improve student confidence and security in their educational journey. However, if trust is not successfully achieved or indeed broken, this can lead to students feeling alienated from education based on their own individual psychosocial status or their own view of themselves. The PATA theory connects the elements of students' psychosocial, academic trust and engagement, and thus proposes an original concept of alienation theory (see Figure 1).

Knowledge of the PATA theory could enable educators to consider the power of the relationship between the internal world of the student and the social environment in which they are positioned as part of their programmes of study.

**Reflection Point:** *What is important to note here is that a student's psychosocial status and academic trust status can fluctuate positively or negatively in response to the educational experiences encountered. This means that for students who display disengaging behaviours and have high discrepancies between their self-concept and self-esteem, affecting academic trust, there is scope to make changes to support the student from negative to positive. Applying the PATA theory could bring new insights to practice that will aid the student and the education setting towards positive educational outcomes. The PATA theory provides a lens for which educators can scrutinise the educational psychological needs of their individual students, to encourage engagement, build trust, minimise alienation and to increase educational success rates contributing to social mobility, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.*

### 3 PATA theory – Case vignettes

The next section of this article explores the PATA Theory, to try to find out how this new lens can be identified in practice to support the most vulnerable within the education system. The case vignettes below help bring to life the different aspects of the PATA theory in practice. The case vignettes are presented in the following age ranges, starting with:

- (1) Further Education ages 16-18 years old;
- (2) Secondary Education ages 11-16 years old;
- (3) Primary Education ages 5-11 years old;
- (4) Early Years Education ages 0-5 years old.

#### Points for Consideration when reading the Case Vignettes:

**Barriers to Education:**

What might be the barriers to educational engagement for each student in the Case Vignette?

**Alienation:**

What signs of alienation are these students displaying and how is this interrupting their educational progress?

**Psychosocial:**

- (1) What is affecting the student's capability (self-concept)?
- (2) What has changed in the student's confidence (self-esteem)?

**Trust:**

How does the influence of self-concept and self-esteem (psychosocial) affect the student's ability to trust in their educational relationships with staff and other students and the teaching and learning environment?

## Case vignettes

### Higher Education Case Vignette – Ages 19+

Asma is a mature student aged 35 years old, who is enrolled on a Foundation Degree in the Social Science field. This means that Asma works in occupational practice 3 days per week and attends University 2 days per week. Asma achieved low grades in her Secondary school qualifications, particularly in English. She re-sat her English qualification and managed to achieve the required grade for her university application, although has not practised many of the intricacies of the English curriculum for many years. In Semester 1, Asma attended every seminar and lecture and contributed verbally, she seemed keen to share her knowledge of practice applied to the set Seminar group tasks and demonstrated competence in the field and in formative teaching and learning tasks. The first summative assessment was a written essay, however, towards the end of the Semester Asma's attendance became sporadic. She applied for an extension on her summative assessment based on personal circumstances and a two-week extension was granted. When the lecturer checked the summative submission in-box, he found that Asma had submitted a blank page.

### Further education case vignette – Ages 16-25 years

Jack enrolled in college at 16 years old after leaving Secondary school the previous summer. He is studying for a BTEC Level 2, occupational qualification in Sports and is re-sitting his English and Maths GCSE. He hopes to go to university but is worried about his English and Maths GCSE's grades. Jack is in receipt of Pupil Premium Funding and qualifies for Free School Meals when on-site. He also has a part time job at a local leisure centre with his earnings helping his single parent mother and his 4 younger siblings. Recently, Jack's attendance has dropped significantly and during a meeting with his pastoral tutor, he disclosed that he is working extra hours to earn more money to save up for a college field trip, which his family cannot afford. He feels that he will have to miss the sports field trip as it is abroad and expensive, and he also now feels that he has missed out on many weeks of taught content making it feel harder for him to catch up.

### Secondary school case vignette – Ages 11-16 years old

Shannon is 14 years old and lives with her mum and two sisters and they live in rented Local Authority Housing in an urban area where deprivation levels are high. This year Shannon has chosen her GCSE option units for which she will study in year 10 and year 11. She has chosen; drama, art and food technology and she will be studying these alongside the compulsory core subjects of Maths, English, and Science. More recently, Shannon has been struggling with authority in school and has been displaying challenging and defiant behaviours. The school have a strict uniform dress code and the girls are not allowed to wear make-up or jewellery; however, Shannon likes to wear bright false nails, make-up and a non-uniform regulation jacket. Shannon's choices lead to her being reprimanded regularly by school staff either in the corridors, during lunchtimes or lessons. She is often sent out of class and is sent to detention or put in isolation for poor behaviour choices meaning she misses key teaching and learning and struggles to catch-up when back in the classroom. The school have contacted her mother and they have had several meetings, but as Shannon's mother goes to work early, she does not always see what Shannon is wearing. Shannon is part of a large friendship group, which consists of boys and girls. There is regular 'drama' with small fallings out that can affect how Shannon copes in her lessons, although she has her best friend in most of her lessons who provides Shannon with some support and helps her with maths and science subjects. Shannon also regularly visits the pastoral team.

### Primary school case vignette – Ages 5-11 years old

Amir is 9 years old, and he lives with foster carers and has moved home 3 times in the last 12 months. Teachers have noticed that Amir is consistently displaying low level disruptive behaviours in the classrooms, such as poking and prodding other students who are sat nearby or distracting the teachers with continuous questions that are unrelated to the taught subject. He has missed handing in homework for the last 6 weeks and when questioned shrugs his shoulders. So far in the academic year, Amir is achieving at the lower level of the academic expectations for key stage 2, although teachers feel that he has potential to sit comfortably in the mid-high levels of achievements. Amir is often tearful and has found it difficult forming relationships with peers and school staff.

### Early years case vignette – 0-5 years old

Kofi is 3 years and 2 months old and attends nursery for 15 hours per week. Kofi's family live near a Children's Centre where the nursery is based. The Children's Centre provides targeted parental support for those who live in areas of high deprivation. The nursery follows the Early

Years Foundation Stage Curriculum and during recent observations have identified that Kofi's speech and language levels have dropped and that he is struggling to be understood when he speaks to other children and staff members. Practitioners assess Kofi's speech and language ability and identify that he is below the expectations for his age and stage. Practitioners describe Kofi as a bright little boy as they have observed him completing complex tasks during play, such as tower building, where instead of counting the bricks he nods his head, demonstrating his ability to cognitively understand the process of number building. More recently he has started to become frustrated when building towers and nodding his head each time he adds another brick, and then knocks the tower down and becomes tearful. When he feels like this, he pushes staff members away who try to console him or re-direct his attention.

## 4 Practical teaching and learning strategies

These case vignettes highlight that the PATA theory lends itself to particular age groups more effectively. For instance, in the Early Years Sector, teaching practice is focussed on care and education, which encompasses many of the aspects of the PATA theory. For example, the Early Years sector is very much focused on relationship building with the child and their families to aid the child's development. This sector also has a flexible curriculum where planning and practice is adapted to suit the needs of the individual child (DfE, 2021b; DfE, 2021c). An Early Years key worker system is in place in the UK where practitioners work with small groups of young children to provide educational experiences, but also 'attachment' and consistency of care to further aid a child's development. Staff are trained to plan for the individual child and undertake regular planning review, observation and assessment activities to enable the child to move forwards in their educational progression. Additionally, Early Years practice is embedded in multi-agency and inter-professional working, liaising across health, social care and family support services for early intervention where needed. Their aim is to enable the Early Years children to be 'school ready' in terms of overarching targets (DfE 2021b; 2021c). There are, obviously challenges within this educational system, and the term 'school ready' is a contentious debate and of course nurturing relationships are affected by staff turnover. However, the key point is that within the Early Years sector the approach is very much focused on 'care and education'. For example, if a child were to present with disengaging behaviours in the Early Years, then there are already nurturing systems in place to address these, such as changes to planning, pedagogy, practice and possible referrals to outside agencies. Additionally, Early Years practice identifies when the individual child needs comfort, care and education and has the scope to provide a holistic approach to pedagogy.

These relational and nurturing approaches to education become somewhat diluted as a child progresses further on into their educational journey, with less and less nurturing and focus on their individual needs. Instead, as students' progress through the educational systems, they become more focused on meeting educational targets and a 'one size fits all' school system approach. For many mainstream students, this teaching methodology works well, however, for those students who do not quite fit the mainstream eg. those with English as an Additional Language, Special Educational Needs, disadvantaged students, these educational systems can contribute to student alienation.

Recent research has identified that in the later years of a disadvantaged child or young person's educational journey is when alienation predominantly takes hold, as it manifests itself as barriers to student engagement (Jones, 2022). Meaning that there are specific educational points during a child's educational journey where alienation and barriers to engagement become more prominent. It is at these moments, where educators can use the PATA theory most effectively, to assess the needs of the individual child and put in strategies based on mutual respect, transparent evaluation, appreciation and support.

PATA theory research has identified some practical strategies which could be employed to reduce barriers to student engagement across the educational systems.

### Teaching and learning strategies

(1) Design bespoke psychosocial and academic trust, teaching and learning assessment tools to use as a guide when assessing the individual educational needs of a student who is displaying disengagement or barriers to engagement in education. These assessment tools can be adapted and designed around educational themes or be designed subject specific. The tool can also help to pick up any identified unmet needs eg. gaps in educational capabilities such as speech, language, writing ability, reading, understanding of language.

Remember the key and overarching focus is to help the student progress educationally. The goal is for the student to be engaged in teaching and learning. This may involve an educational cultural move away from punitive behaviour management practices eg. time spent in isolation, the student being suspended or excluded for alienating behaviours (Lamrhari et al., 2021). With

strategies focusing on how best to 'include' the student within education and understanding their individual educational needs to access teaching and learning to enable ongoing educational progression. This is the key to equality of opportunity for SES students.

(2) Creating intervention or educational packages for students who are displaying barriers to engagement aligned to the PATA theory. For example, counselling, coaching and mentoring approaches have been identified as effective strategies for disadvantaged students. These methods may aid increased attendance and student engagement. It is also important for educators to understand when relationships between teacher/student are not working positively. If this is happening, then it might be an idea to find alternative staff or student peers (who share similar characteristics to the student) to support the young person as a mentor/role model or personal tutor. The key element is that the relationship is based on mutual respect, transparent evaluation, appreciation, and support to build reciprocated trust to be most effective. This will take time and energy for both the school, teaching staff, support staff and the young person. Getting to know the young person as an individual is very important, considering their holistic needs is crucial.

(3) Embed student voice in any decision making, consultation processes and make sure the student's voice is heard and that they feel listened to (UNCRC, 1989; Lamrhari et al., 2021).

(4) Embed additional student peer based active learning strategies, such as smaller group work or team building opportunities into the education culture to facilitate trusting environments and educational community cultures.

(5) Nurturing and trauma-informed pedagogy for the disadvantaged student demographic needs to be integrated into educational systems by developing staff knowledge and understanding in these areas via teacher training and in-set training days or continuing professional development days.

#### **School leadership strategies**

(1) Having a consistent staff team of educators and school support staff, with whom students can build trust to develop tacit knowledge throughout the students educational and academic journey. This must be based on mutual respect, appreciation, positive support and transparent and evaluative practices. Traditionally the power positioning within education is in the hands of the educators/education systems and the students are deemed passive in this role. However, there needs to be an understanding of power balance for elements of the PATA theory to succeed, especially when aiming to build, maintain and develop mutual trusting relationships for disadvantaged students or those who are displaying alienation or disengagement.

(2) Include protected 1-2-1 tutorial/pastoral modules in staff timetables/work load plans, to provide time and space to focus on building trusting relationship with students. Regular personal tutorials and face-to-face assessment/action plan feedback opportunities could be implemented to cultivate mutual trusting relationships as part of the educational offer.

(3) Assess staff turnover, sickness, use of supply teachers, fixed term posts and staff resignations and other potential interruptions to consistent supportive student/teacher relationships to protect students from relationship disruptions during their educational experience.

(4) Assess staff recruitment procedures and consider opportunities for staff who have lived experiences or who share common characteristics to the student demographics. Having a staff team who can be strong role models for SES students can be aspirational and also provides the students with 'empathy' and understanding as to the many challenges they may be facing. *'Trauma-informed services should also mean that services are informed by people who have lived experience of trauma.'* (Power, 2022 p3).

(5) Embed psychological educational practices, trauma-informed, empathy and social pedagogy into teacher training, to strengthen the skills of the education workforce. It is vital that teaching and school staff understand the holistic needs of a student in order to aid their educational progression. For example, if a child living in poverty is arriving hungry then it makes perfect sense that they are struggling to engage with their programme of study.

(6) Signpost students to professional counselling, coaching and mentoring services to help build self-esteem, understanding of emotions and empathy (Power, 2022). Connect with local charity or community youth groups. Or employ youth workers to support specific needs of the students.

(7) Diminish punitive behaviour management strategies that cause conflict and contribute to further alienation and replace with positive behaviour management techniques. We have to ask ourselves, as educators, what are the benefits of punishing the whole class if one child cannot stand still in the line-up before entering the classroom. A review of behaviour management practices and consequences is recommended. Consider, how is the current practice affecting teaching and learning? Punishing a child for wearing the wrong shoes and sending them into isolation for the day will have a detrimental impact on their levels of trust and engagement exacerbating alienation (Lamrhari et al., 2021) potentially putting young people at a higher risk

of exploitation or criminal county lines ([The Children's Society, 2022](#)). Can other more positive strategies be used instead that focus on teaching and learning progression, for example, based on the individual needs of the student.

(8) Following a PATA assessment and set subsequent action plans, consider establishing a flexible curriculum, with regular planning and assessment points for students who are displaying alienating behaviours. Set achievable and manageable targets that are regularly reviewed for both the student and the education system within which they are placed. Remember trust is a two-way exchange and the student and the education system need to honour their pledges.

(9) Write and implement an Educational Social Mobility policy, that is reviewed at Board-/Governor and Leadership level, where local school data is scrutinised, and action plans are implemented for improvements where identified. There must be a clear vision, mission and strategic objectives set with timescales for review. Consider Governor training for trauma-informed, empathy, social pedagogy practices.

(10) Write and implement an early intervention assessment policy for disengaging or alienating students, that is based on the educational psychological needs of the individual student underpinned by the PATA theory.

These recommendations may not fit universal education, they may sit more comfortably with those schools with large populations of disadvantaged students or those schools who are based within demographic areas of high deprivation. These recommendations may also aid small numbers of students based within mainstream schools in affluent areas. It is important to note that schools may not need to implement all elements, many schools will already be encompassing and practising many of these recommendations. What they may need to do now, is to review what they are already doing against the principles of the PATA theory and then concentrate on bridging any gaps. The key to identification of when to implement the PATA theory is to do so for any student who is displaying alienating or disengaging behaviours. Early intervention may aid the student to 'get back on track' quickly. The longer a student is left to disengage the harder is it to re-engage them back into education and to catch up on missed teaching and learning, which again will exacerbate feelings of alienation. Research shows that excluded or disengaged students are also at a higher risk of exploitation and criminal county lines ([Lamrhari et al, 2021](#)) so it is in the best interests of the student, the school and society to make system changes to support this vulnerable demographic.

#### **Government policy and support**

It is also important to note that Government support via increased funding, teacher training, policy and legislation implementation is also needed to further support the education sector with the PATA theory in practice. The benefits of increased equality of education and opportunity would impact positively upon students from SES backgrounds, increasing potential employment opportunities and contributions to the economy. [Henry et al. \(2012\)](#) identified that school disengagement and academic underachievement has severe long-term effects for the individual student, their families and society. They also acknowledged links between school dropout rates resulting from disengagement being a direct correlation leading to lower future earning potential over the student's life, with an amplified possibility of involvement in criminality and imprisonment.

## **5 Conclusion**

This article reinforces that it is vital within the current educational and socio-economic landscape that educational practice be reviewed to meet the needs of the diverse student population. This means evolving practice and thinking creatively to enable disadvantaged students the opportunity to thrive and succeed within and throughout their educational journey. Although there is considerable pressure on the educational establishments and staff to meet government targets, it would seem morally right to adapt practice so that it is fit for purpose. Offering inclusivity and equality of opportunity by adapting practice has the potential to increase student engagement through teaching and learning, which in turn will impact ongoing educational progress of vulnerable students, leading to increased success and educational progression rates. If the true spirit of the educational social mobility agenda is to be fulfilled, then it is crucial that education contextualises the needs of their student market. The PATA theory could be a useful tool to support educational progression and student outcomes underpinned by a social pedagogical (trauma-informed, empathetic, nurturing) approach for disadvantaged students in education.

Knowledge and understanding of the PATA theory, is of course, only one method of viewing the conundrum of social mobility and educational disadvantage. It has to be acknowledged that the PATA theory is also not the golden ticket, as there are strengths and limitations to this theory with scope for critique. For example, in an ideal world education systems would

have the time, the funding and the appropriate staff training to implement the PATA theory, but as we well know, in education, and from other educational theorists, there are other outside forces that cannot be dismissed. Currently the education sector is suffering from a lack of funding, pressures from regulatory bodies, government targets and staff who are either under immense pressure or are opting to leave the profession in their droves. All of these factors, have a significant impact on the potential success of the PATA theory in practice and thus the quest for educational equality. This is without taking into account the effects of a Global Pandemic on education, which has been severely disrupted by lockdowns, illness and home-schooling.

There is no doubt that there is an argument for further research to be undertaken across a wider educational sample group, perhaps using alternative data collection methods to further strengthen and validate the PATA theoretical perspective. For now, though, the PATA theory provides a new lens through which to view educational social mobility and the growing educational gap between those from low SES households and their more affluent peers or for those students who demonstrate disengaging or alienating characteristics.

To conclude, this review article establishes the connections between disadvantage, educational social mobility, and barriers to student engagement across educational practice and has explored the intricacies via the scope of the PATA theory. This suggests that the principles of the PATA theory can be translated across the educational age ranges, as a new theoretical perspective in which to view educational psychology for the most vulnerable groups of society. In addition, countries who share similar education systems, demographics and socio-economic statistics to the UK may also find knowledge of the PATA theory in practice valuable.

## Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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