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Methods and Strategies for Engaging Disengaged Students in the Digital Language Classroom:

An explorative and dialectical study based on educational and
socio–psychological theory and teacher’s lived experience

Author: Jakob Wingren
Supervisor: Glen Helmstad

Abstract

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Author:	Jakob Wingren
Supervisor:	Glen Helmstad
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Summary:	<p>Disengagement is a phenomenon that exists to some degree in all levels of education. Socio-psychological in nature, it manifests in a wide array of behaviours, from inactivity to disruptive behaviour.</p> <p>This thesis is an explorative and dialectical study of the methods and strategies used to engage disengaged students, focusing on the digital language classroom. Using qualitative research methods, this thesis explores previous research on the term <i>disengaged students</i> and the methods and strategies suggested to engage students. The discussion interweaves, analyses, and compares empirical material collected via two semi-structured interviews and personal teaching experience.</p> <p>This thesis suggests that implementing preventive measures, such as relationship building, differentiated instruction, and efficient communication between teacher and student, is the most efficient way to tackle disengagement. This nurtures a mutual understanding between teacher and student, allowing the student to feel comfortable in the classroom and equipped with the necessary tools to create a sense of agency in their learning process. In addition to these challenges, the term <i>disengaged students</i> is loaded with negative connotations and does not accurately describe the complex socio-psychological phenomena that is disengagement.</p>
Keywords:	Disengaged students, disengagement, engagement, language classrooms, digital classrooms, relational teaching, coherence, flow, pedagogical content knowledge.

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For Lily

Acknowledgements

The inspiration for this thesis comes from my own daily experience of teaching secondary school. As any subject teacher will tell you, teaching a subject in which you have a dedicated and passionate interest to a group of secondary school students inevitably involves both good days and bad days. To inspire learning, interest, and future passion is – without doubt – the best aspect of teaching. This thesis aims to provide guidance on how to handle the days when things do not go according to plan, or any other day in which you find yourself in the situation where a student is disengaged in the classroom.

I would like to express my love and gratitude for my fiancée, Lisa, who has supported and helped me throughout the writing process, and for my daughter, Lily, who continuously reminds me why I chose to become a teacher. I am also grateful to the rest of my loving family for their support. Finally, I would like to thank my thesis supervisor, Glen, and teaching placement supervisor, Jeanette, for their guidance, help, and encouragement, for which I am very grateful.

Lund, May 2020

Jakob Wingren

Introduction

Every day, teachers encounter students who are, to some degree, unwilling to learn or incapable of class participation; in short, disengaged students. This phenomenon, which is both sociological and psychological in nature, can be attributed to several underlying factors. The theoretical term *disengaged students* aims to describe this particular type of student (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015, p 14). The term is wide in scope and difficult to narrow down to a single definition. It may describe students who are not engaged in their education due to a lack of interest or motivation, or it may describe students who do not engage because of a lack of prerequisite knowledge in the subject area. The former is an active choice made by the student, whereas the latter is a consequence of the student's educational history. While the reasons for student disengagement may differ, the core of the term's definition focuses on general inactivity and disengaged behaviour in the classroom (ibid.). The complexity of a student's initial disengagement and the potential explanations for it are widely discussed in educational research, as are the methods and strategies for managing and engaging these students (ibid.). The term is multifaceted and hard to define, to such a degree that caution is recommended when defining students without first attempting to establish why they appear to be disengaged (ibid.). The term assumes a value of sorts and mislabelling, or overuse may create negative connotations in its meaning over time.

During each placement period of the teaching qualification program, in the spring and autumn of 2019 and in the spring of 2020, I met and taught students who I believe fit the theoretical definition of disengagement in one or more ways. To combat this, I made certain adjustments to both lesson planning and the educational process in the classroom to handle the ramifications of disengagement, and to ensure increased learning was possible for every student in the classroom. This process was not without certain difficulties and challenges, the most significant issue being how to accommodate the needs of an individual student within the context of the educational needs of the class as a group. During my placement, I had many opportunities to investigate and evaluate different methods and strategies for dealing with situations that arise in a classroom with disengaged students. However, after completing my placement, I felt strongly that further research on this topic was needed, largely because its complexity runs deeper than might be apparent from an initial overview. For example, many of the methods and strategies described in previous research require time and resources that a subject teacher rarely has access to. It is important to develop efficient methods and strategies for pedagogical content knowledge and to provide resources to engage disengaged students. As a language instructor, I also feel the need for further research into the methods and strategies that are specific to the language classroom due to the unique characteristics it possesses. With the widespread availability and prevalence of

technological tools, such laptops and smartphones, such a classroom may be described as digital.

The objective of this thesis is to describe, discuss, and analyse the methods and strategies used to educate disengaged students at the upper secondary school level, specifically those in a digital language classroom. I believe that further understanding of such methods and strategies will prove exceptionally useful for all teachers. It is worth noting that disengaged students appear to have always existed and will, to a certain degree, always exist in the classroom environment. However, this should not deter the pursuit of developing, analysing, and evaluating different ways a subject teacher can handle disengagement.

Background

As mentioned above, a significant amount of research exists in connection to the term *disengaged students*. Many academic articles, such as Goodson and Crick (2009) and Nicholson and Putwain (2015), focus on specific methods for dealing with these types of students and creating classrooms that engage students. Some methods and strategies prevalent in several research papers worth mentioning are *enquiry-based learning*, *narrative learning*, and *theme-based curricula*.

Hancock and Zubrick's (2015) substantial report, organised by the Commissioner for Children and Young People of Western Australia, defines and discusses the complexity of the term *disengaged students* and provides an overview of previous academic papers on the topic. In the report, the authors discuss the risk factors surrounding disengaged students, one consequence being that students may distance themselves from school, as well as examples of how disengaged behaviour is manifest in the classroom. The authors also discuss how disengagement is perceived from different perspectives, such as teacher or student, and how this influences attitudes, interchanges, and communications with parents and caretakers.

Other academic articles like Hanna (2014) focus on broader strategies, such as creating a classroom environment built on trust and emotional honesty, while others like Ennis (2000) centre on theme-based curricula focused on a socially constructivist perspective of acquiring knowledge to engage the students with. These strategies fit well with my own perspective on knowledge and my understanding of the role of a subject teacher in the classroom. Based on my own experiences while on placement and substitute teaching assignments, I discovered that the most efficient way of creating a classroom of engaged students is to focus on a few key factors: intelligibility; coherence in communication and instruction; developing and nurturing motivating factors; and building trust, honesty, and a sense of reliability between the students and myself. Goodson and Crick (2009) write about a strategy called *curriculum as prescription*

where they describe a narrative and formative perspective on an education process with goal-oriented curricula. This suits my own ideas and understanding about how to create an environment conducive to learning. Goodson and Crick describe the student's identity and decisiveness as central components of the learning process when it is adapted to accommodate individual learning needs. This enhances the possibility of engaging the student in the classroom (ibid.).

With an increasing number of students in today's classrooms, and the many potential sources of distraction, such as smartphones and laptops, it seems easier than ever for disengaged students to fall into the shadow of anonymity. Much of the earlier academic research on the topic was written when the language classroom environment differed significantly from today. As a result, there is a need to reassess the disengaged student with the digital language classroom in mind. This is a deliberate choice to limit the scope of the paper and focus the research, analysis, and subsequent discussion. The language classroom was chosen because of my own experience as a language instructor. In theory, it is a type of classroom that demands engagement to a higher extent than other classrooms, especially those where education processes are oriented towards lectures and individual assignments rather than the constant social interactions demanded of language learning.

The analysis chapter of this thesis describes and outlines a chosen few methods and strategies for engagement based on previously suggested research and academic articles. Their logic, pre-requisites of pedagogical content knowledge, preparation, resources, and practical effects on education are reflected on and problematized in the hope of contributing further insights to the ongoing discourse on the topic.

Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to describe, problematize, and evaluate different methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students in the digital language classroom. The aim is to contribute to and complement previous academic research through analysis and reflection, focusing on the variety of methods previously proposed, how they are used, and their effects. This will not only further my own knowledge and skillset as a teacher but also provide guidance to colleagues and future subject teachers. I see this as especially important due to the lack of time and resources that a subject teacher currently has at their disposal, as well as other consequences stemming from the recent teacher shortage in Sweden (Wallin, 2018).

The research questions of this thesis are twofold in scope. My first research question is:

Which methods and strategies to engage disengaged students have been previously suggested, and what are their effects, consequences, or requirements, for both teachers and students?

My second research question is:

How do these methods and strategies compare to the practical reality of teaching in a digital language classroom?

In response to the first research question, I will establish an overview of existing academic articles about the methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students in order to describe, problematize, and evaluate them. Regarding the second research question, I will build on this knowledge and begin to describe, problematize, and evaluate the methods and strategies in a practical setting, namely the digital language classroom. I selected six peer-reviewed academic articles, all written between 2000 and 2015, for the purpose of examining similarities, differences, and recurring themes in their chosen methods and strategies. The articles are given an individual overview before being analysed in connection to the first research question. Further theories in educational and sociological research are also presented here to aid the discussion and analysis. For the second research question, empirical material specifically collected for this thesis in the form of two semi-structured interviews with a subject teacher are used alongside my own documented experiences of teaching. The empirical material is described and analysed with the second research question in mind.

Thesis structure

The remainder of this thesis contains a methodological chapter, a chapter for the analysis of results, and a final chapter concluding the findings of the thesis. A list of references and appendices are included at the end.

The methodology chapter describes the methods used for research conducted for this thesis as well as the writing process itself. The chapter includes sections on qualitative research, discourse analysis, semi-structured interviews, and narrative method where research methods are described, explained, and motivated. The analysis chapter is divided into two sub-chapters, the first focusing on analysis theory and the second devoted to analysing the empirical material of a teacher's lived experience. Occasionally, the discussion of theory and empirical material intertwines, which is a feature of the explorative and dialectical approach of this thesis. Both the theoretical and empirical subchapters of the analysis chapter are further divided into thematic sections for the purpose of overview and cohesion. The thesis ends with a concluding chapter that summarises and discusses the theoretical and empirical material reviewed within and provides a presentation of the conclusions and findings of this thesis.

Methodology

This thesis centres around the term *disengaged students*, particularly what it is and how it manifests and is handled in the classroom. This is a term as well as a socio-psychological phenomenon, and this duality is reflected in the choice of methodology for this thesis. When researching such a phenomenon, focus inevitably lies on meaning-making rather than on numerical data analysis (Krauss, 2015. p. 763). This paper has no ambitions of producing generalized results, rather it will focus on furthering the understanding of the *disengaged students* phenomenon. As a result, the thesis takes a dialectical and explorative approach built on qualitative research. Empirical material was gathered in the form of two semi-structured interviews along with documented personal reflections from placement periods and substitute teaching assignments. Inductive reasoning is applied to draw conclusions from these situations and to further the understanding of theory (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2015. p. 26). From here, the discussion takes a dialectical and explorative approach as the theory and teacher's lived experience are discussed side-by-side, much like a two-way conversation. Originally, the methodology included a few minor observational studies set in the language classroom environment, however, these became impossible to complete due to the COVID-19 pandemic as upper secondary schools in Sweden began to transition to distance learning (Folkhälsomyndigheten, 2020). Observational data collection during this period was no longer possible.

A literature review of previous academic research on the topic was completed to create a basis for discussion. This was necessary to answer the first research question and also to problematize and reflect on the practical ramifications of the suggested methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students. Comparisons are then drawn between previous academic research and collected empirical material. Discourse analysis is also undertaken, focusing on the definition and categorisation of *disengaged students* as well as analysis of its values and connotations. Christoffersen and Johannessen (2015) describes discourse analysis as “an analysis of statements, sayings, and texts with emphasis on how people can be categorized and how this effects their possibility to act” (p. 102). Discourse analysis thus enables us to investigate how we discuss a certain topic and what effects it may have in practice (ibid.; Brinkkjær & Høyen, 2013. p. 94). This works as part of the dialectical approach of theory and empirical material in this thesis.

To efficiently compare and discuss the relationship between theory and teacher's lived experience in disengagement in the classroom, two interviews were held with a subject teacher (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2015. p. 84). This is a natural choice for an interview on this topic considering subject teachers are the primary active participant in a classroom setting and key in terms of reviewing, selecting, and evaluating methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students (ibid. p. 84). Additionally, semi-

structured interviews are an appropriate research method as they allow for open-ended answers and provide a means of dialogue (Ibid, p. 85). Describing the theories of Henriksen and Kvale, Brinkkjær and Høyen assert the importance of engaging in dialogue with “the people whose lives are being investigated and researched” by your scientific research, and that “dialogue is absolutely essential if you are to comprehend other people’s understanding [my translation from Swedish]” (2013. p. 110).

Parts of the empirical section in the analysis chapter are written using narrative method. This meant structuring some of the discussion as a narrative with descriptions and anecdotes based on my individual teaching experiences from each placement period and substitute teaching assignment. This is integrated continuously with material from the two interviews. This format was chosen because I deem it the most logical way to present the empiric material. The lines between my own reflections and the results of the interviews are clearly outlined so that questions about source origin can be avoided. This thesis is written according to the principles of research ethics, with the integrity of individuals and organizations preserved through anonymity. In terms of my own reflexivity as a researcher, it should be noted that part of the empirical material for this thesis is based on my own experiences in the classroom in the capacity of a subject teacher. As such, I am both the source and researcher of this material. To preserve the integrity and overall quality of the empirical material, I contrast and compare my own reflections with that of another subject teacher: the interviewee.

Qualitative research

This thesis deals with phenomena, behaviour, and situations that are social in nature, both in terms of individual to individual interaction, such as teacher to student or student to student, and those in a group setting, such as the language classroom. Qualitative research employs methods such as observation, reflection, interviews, and textual or discourse analysis, all useful ways of attempting to make sense of meaning from the perspective of the individual and the group in a “social world” (Krauss, 2005. pp. 763–764). This is closely linked to the perspective of social constructivism, namely by the belief that social interaction is the basis of knowledge (“Social Constructivism,” n.d.). Vygotsky argues that it is impossible to “separate learning from its social context” (ibid.). In this thesis, the phenomenon of *disengaged students* is viewed with a similar philosophy.

With that in mind, using qualitative research with a dialectical and explorative approach seems the most suitable research method for this thesis, due its particular focus on social interaction and the methods and strategies to be developed and utilized in a social setting. It also allows for the kind of flexibility required when investigating these kind of phenomena (Christoffersen & Johannessen, 2015. pp. 15–16). Explained below are the different research methods used in this thesis; discourse analysis is used mainly for

analysing theory and previous research, whereas semi-qualitative interviews and narrative method are used to collect and render empirical material.

Discourse analysis

Analysing written material from a social setting or perspective is called discourse analysis (Nordquist, 2020). This is a useful research method when reviewing the meaning that language can take in reality. As part of this thesis, previous academic articles on methods and strategies for dealing with disengaged students are analysed. Using discourse analysis to review these articles allows for an analysis of the practical ramifications of the methods and strategies described within them. In terms of educational research, methods and strategies for learning are often explained using certain phrases and concepts, for example, *intelligibility*; a complex, multilayered, term which is contextually bound and has many different meanings depending on whose perspective is selected (“Intelligibility,” n.d.). Discourse analysis is useful to elaborate and problematize the use of these terms to shed light on the practical usage of methods of strategies for disengaged students in the classroom. Thus, it is a useful method to evaluate the practical use of a theory and to further contextualize the concepts that can be found in theory. It is also helpful in ensuring a critical perspective on theory, therefore ensuring the overall quality of my conclusions.

Semi-structured interviews

As part of the dialectical and explorative approach of this thesis, I have chosen to work with semi-structured interviews to collect empiric material, as opposed to structured interviews or questionnaires that leave less room for flexibility and open-ended answers. Semi-structured interviews allow for focus on a specific topic, while maintaining the possibility of deviation into different avenues of exploration (Adams, 2015. p. 493). This includes follow-up questions and further discussion of topics that would not necessarily have been broached during a more structured interview process. As part of the dialectical approach of this thesis, I decided to perform the interviews in a two-stage process with the same subject teacher, henceforth named as such for the sake of in-text citations. An initial interview was followed up by a secondary interview after a period of writing. This allowed me to conduct the second interview, theoretically, from a more informed point of view, allowing me to guide the interview using some of my preliminary findings. I found this approach to be more beneficial than interviewing several subject teachers. My primary reason for not choosing the latter was the risk of encountering many of the same reflections for no apparent methodological benefit, particularly because this thesis is not aiming for generalized results.

The interview audio was recorded with a smartphone, and consent was given by the interviewee before transcription and documentation were completed for this thesis. All

names of people and organizations have been removed to maintain anonymity for the interviewee. Consequently, the subject teacher is referred to in text by the gender-neutral pronouns, *they*, *them*, and *their*. I conducted the two interviews on 2nd of April and 18th of May 2020. The first interview took place in person, with the second via video chat. The basis for the interview questions can be found in the appendices section of this thesis. It should be noted that the interviews were conducted in Swedish and that direct quotations and expressions taken from the interviews have been translated into English by myself.

For the purpose of this thesis, the interviewee can be seen as both an authority on how disengagement manifests and is handled in practice, and also as a co-researcher and a conversational participant who contributes to the dialectical approach of this thesis. The interviewee can be seen as an authority on practice due to their twenty-year experience as a subject teacher, and as a co-researcher because of their role in the dialectical approach of pondering between theory and lived experience. In this way, the reflections of the subject teacher further the understanding of previous research, and vice-versa. This is part of the critical approach of this thesis.

Narrative method

Narrative method as part of qualitative research entails presenting “human experience as it is represented in textual form” (Salkind, 2010). It is a common method in research that takes a socially constructivist approach and presents experience from the social context it was taken from. This method is, therefore, useful in contextualizing social experiences, like those in a classroom. It should be noted that narrative method collects data by documenting personal experiences or listening to other people’s experiences, and it is also a method of presenting data by organising these experiences by storytelling (ibid.).

This thesis makes use of both practices of narrative method. I have documented my own experiences in the classroom, as well as the experiences of the interviewed teacher. The latter can be described as a teacher’s *lived experience*, being the representation of a teacher’s experience, which has been encountered first-hand, recounted, written down, and subsequently reproduced in textual form (Given, 2008). Both sets of experience are described by narrative method in the analysis chapter of this thesis. The reason for this is the social nature of the classroom, which makes experiences taken from such a setting best told through narrative method as opposed to other research methods that focus on isolating phenomena from context. In this way, methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students in the classroom can be discussed in context.

Analysis

The following analysis chapter is divided into two sub-chapters, one focused on how disengagement looks in theory and the other focused on how disengagement looks through teacher's lived experience. The theory section is structured as a literature overview and focuses on discourse analysis of academic articles written about methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students. The section on teacher's lived experience is structured as an empirical discussion based on the materials collected for this thesis. This chapter structure relies on the two research questions being discussed separately before the concepts bridge together in the concluding chapter. The individual sub-chapter structure is briefly summarized at the start of each sub-chapter.

Disengaged students in theory

In this first sub-chapter of the analysis chapter, a literature review and discourse analysis of six academic articles is completed, focusing on their discussion of methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students. The aim is to describe, problematize, and evaluate the methods and strategies found in these articles. Each article is briefly summarized before I proceed to its analysis.

This sub-chapter is divided into four sections: terms and expressions, which focuses on explaining some of the reoccurring terminologies; theoretical overview and concepts, which focuses on providing an initial overview of some theory and concepts useful for discussing disengagement; research aimed at pedagogical content knowledge, which focuses on academic articles highlighting teacher-bound methods and strategies; and finally research focusing on the student perspective, which looks at academic articles highlighting student-bound methods and strategies.

Terms and expressions

Throughout this chapter, a number of terms and expression are recurrent. For the sake of precision and cohesion, as well as textual brevity, they are defined and briefly explained here instead of in other chapters. The central term *disengaged students* will not be given further deliberation as it is sufficiently defined and discussed in the introduction chapter.

Disengagement is a socio-psychological term indicating a detachment from society, or in this case, from social activity (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015. pp. 4, 6) Antonymous to *engagement*, *disengagement* is defined by inactivity, by the state of not being attached to something else. In this thesis, I use disengagement to indicate both a physical and mental state of not engaging with the education process, as defined below. Mental

disengagement is not always as apparent as physical disengagement and can sometimes manifest in similar ways to engagement (ibid.).

The *education process* is the process by which learning is conducted in a classroom environment between a subject teacher and a group of students. In this thesis, I use the term to signify a specific lesson, or class, as well as a collection of lessons, such as a course running over a semester. In connection to the term *disengagement*, a student can, to varying degrees, participate in the education process by performing the tasks and assignments ascribed by the subject teacher.

Intelligibility is the “capability of being understood” (“Intelligibility,” n.d.). This can be taken to mean both textual communication as well as oral communication. In this thesis, I use the term primarily to discuss how well a teacher is able to pedagogically communicate the subject matter of the lesson or course to their students. See below for the definition of *Pedagogical content knowledge* for an additional term that deals with a similar situation.

Interest is “the feeling of a person whose attention, concern, or curiosity is particularly engaged by something” or “something that concerns, involves, draws the attention of, or arouses the curiosity of a person” (“Interest,” n.d.). Thus, interest can be described as a particular emotion or state of mind that can trigger – or perhaps, lead to – engagement. This particular connection to engagement is a matter of attention when it comes to methods and strategies for dealing with disengagement by trying to develop interest.

Lived experience is a “representation and understanding of a researcher or research subject's human experiences, choices, and options, and how those factors influence one's perception of knowledge (Given, 2008). In this thesis, a subject teacher's lived experience is used as the primary empirical material. The use of the term is motivated by a need to distinguish between representation of experience and actual experience. The former is an effort to portray reality through representation and thus inevitably includes value-sets and subjectivity as it is filtered through both retelling and representation.

Motivation is “the act or an instance of motivating or providing with a reason to act in a certain way” or “the state or condition of being motivated or having a strong reason to act or accomplish something” (“Motivation,” n.d.). Thus, motivation deals with reasons or underlying factors for behaviour. For this thesis, motivation is interesting in terms of underlying factors and reasons for engagement in the education process.

Pedagogical content knowledge, or *PCK*, is a term coined by American educational psychologist Lee S. Schulman (1986. p. 9). The term encompasses a teacher's subject knowledge as well as their pedagogical knowledge in that subject (ibid.). According to

Schulman, the term includes “for the most regular topics in one's subject area, the most useful forms of representation of those ideas, the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations—in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others” (ibid.).

Theoretical overview

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, Hancock and Zubrick’s (2015) report “Children and young people at risk of disengagement from school” deals with the topic of disengaged students as well as methods and strategies for “re-engaging” them (p. 4). The report provides a literary overview of academic articles written on the topic and is therefore suitable for a theoretical overview of the field. Hancock and Zubrick start by defining what the phenomenon of disengagement is, and why it matters, before moving on to risk-factors for disengagement. The report then examines teachers, students, and parents’ views on the phenomenon of disengagement. The report concludes by reviewing methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students.

In the section on defining *disengagement*, the authors set out a multitude of concepts that are included in the term *disengaged students* (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015. pp. 4–5). They assert that there are three different levels on which students might be disengaged; in the class content, in the classroom, and with the school as a whole. They also state that there are different types of disengagement; emotional, behavioural, and cognitive (ibid.). This can be compared to the different types of disengagement mentioned in the introduction chapter of this thesis; disengagement due to lack of interest, and disengagement due to a lack of prerequisite knowledge. These are further elaborated upon in the empirical sub-chapter. This thesis primarily focuses on methods and strategies for dealing with the behavioural side of disengagement, namely the inactive student in the classroom. However, as Hancock and Zubrick hint at, inactivity might not always be the correct word when describing behaviour, as disengaged students often take to other types of disruptive behaviour considered to be “poor classroom behaviour” or “unproductive classroom behaviours” as the authors alternatively describe it (ibid. pp. 4, 6). Therefore, behavioural, emotional, and cognitive disengagement may sometimes coalesce into a complex socio-psychological phenomenon that is problematic to define. Because disengagement may take many forms, it can also be “measured in multiple ways” (ibid. p. 5). This, as well as the concepts discussed above, are all factors that complicate the definition of what a disengaged student is. Like Hancock and Zubrick note, it can be said that “disengagement is both a process and an outcome” (ibid.). Disengagement is not a static phenomenon or an inherent student personality trait, but a complex process with an outcome that is dependent on a multitude of factors. Lastly, Hancock and Zubrick also acknowledge that disengagement is affected by external factors, that is to say those outside of the educational environment (ibid.).

When it comes to external risk factors for student disengagement, it is interesting to note that Hancock and Zubrick mark students with “disadvantageous backgrounds” as “more likely to experience markers of disengagement” (2015. p. 5). They list factors such as “students living in families with limited resources”, “students who arrive at school with limited school readiness”, “students who do not form a connection with school, peers or teachers”, and “students attending schools with a concentration of disadvantaged students” (ibid. p. 6). It is apparent that the former can be linked to, and may result in, disengagement due to a lack of prerequisite knowledge, and the latter to disengagement due to a lack of interest. However, it should be mentioned that disengagement is a phenomenon that can be caused by factors other than socio-economic (Nicholson & Putwain, 2015. p. 38). It cannot, therefore, be explained solely by the socio-economic effects of the student’s prerequisite knowledge and motivation, even if socio-economic factors admittedly have a statically proven prevalence among disengaged students (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015. pp. 5–6).

Before moving on to specific theories that focus on methods and strategies for dealing with disengaged students, I want to outline two relevant theoretical frameworks in social psychology. A useful concept when discussing disengaged students is a *sense of coherence*. The term was coined by Israeli American sociologist, Aaron Antonovsky (1987. p. 19). Antonovsky argued that three specific factors are important in determining whether the psychological phenomenon of stress will upset your sense of internal coherence (ibid.). These factors are *comprehensibility*, *manageability*, and *meaningfulness*. In short, upsetting situations, or any situation that results in stress, will have a lesser impact on your general wellbeing if you understand the situation, feel like you have the necessary skills to manage it, and if it is meaningful for you to resolve the situation (ibid.). In terms of disengaged students, Antonovsky’s *sense of coherence* is useful in understanding the underlying reasons why disengaged students behave in certain ways. Throughout this thesis, I will reference Antonovsky’s theory when relevant and when it provides further insight and analysis of the discussion of empiric material.

Another useful concept is Csikszentmihalyi’s psychological state of *flow* (1990. p. 27). *Flow* can be described as the state of mind of a person when they are utterly focused on a specific task or assignment, disregarding other needs (ibid.). In terms of the scope of this thesis, *flow* implies full engagement in an activity or assignment. *Flow* is connected to intrinsic motivation, when the engagement in the task is motivated purely on its own (ibid.). As a result of this state of mind, the person is utilizing their skills to the utmost of their ability (ibid. p. 31). Csikszentmihalyi further asserts that to achieve a state of *flow*, the balance between the difficulty level and skill set of the person engaged in the task must be perfectly correlated. Any offset in the balance between these two factors will result in failure to achieve a state of *flow* (ibid.). Additionally, the person’s skill set

and the level of difficulty of the task need to be high enough so that the situation can't be described as *apathy* instead of *flow* (ibid.). For the objective of this thesis, the concept of *flow* and the relationship between a student's skill set and the difficulty level of the task or assignment is useful when discussing the underlying reasons for disengagement, or when discussing methods and strategies for engaging students. Finding ways for students to achieve a state of *flow* during the education process certainly seems like a goal worth striving for in the process of creating engagement.

Research focusing on pedagogical content knowledge

Many of the academic articles on disengagement in education and disengaged students focus on the teacher's perspective and aim to provide suggestions for specific types of pedagogical content knowledge that the teacher should develop. In this section, I review three articles that discuss methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students based on a teacher's pedagogical content knowledge.

Ennis's article "Canaries in the Coal Mine: Responding to Disengaged Students Using Theme-Based Curricula" deals with methods and strategies revolving around theme-based curricula for engaging disengaged students in physical education. The article takes a social constructivist perspective on curriculum development (Ennis, 2000. p. 119). Instead of analysing the behaviour or mindset of the disengaged students, Ennis takes the view that they are merely a symptom of a failed system (ibid.). Unlike other articles on disengaged students, Ennis does not start by looking at the behaviour of the students, but at the education curriculum and teaching practices (ibid.). Much like the title of the article suggests, Ennis forms a simile between disengaged students and canaries put into coal mines to warn workers of toxic gas. She suggests that the mere existence of disengaged students should alert us to the inefficiency of the curriculum (ibid. p. 120).

Even though Ennis's article deals with disengaged students in physical education, I believe some of the findings of the article have relevance to the aims of this thesis. The article notably differs from others on the topic by focusing on the education system as a cause for student disengagement, and not on disengaged students as a phenomenon themselves. The article argues for a change in teaching practices, with a focus on theme-based activities that have a pronounced and relevant connection to the student's daily lives (ibid. pp. 122–123). Ennis talks about the importance of "identifying meaningful situations" and incorporating this in the curriculum (ibid. p 123). She also raises the possibility that theme-based curriculums can enable teachers to identify with "diverse students" (ibid. p. 128). This perhaps indirect effect of theme-based curriculum teaching has the potential to be exponentially positive if you believe that a relationship between teacher and student based on understanding is one of the most important factors for engagement.

Hanna's article "Connecting with Sullen Students: Using an Emotionally Honest Classroom to Reach Out to Disengaged Students" describes how creating a specific classroom environment based on honesty, trust, and accountability can help to engage disengaged secondary school students (2014. p. 224). The article focuses on trying to understand the reasons behind student disengagement and relates it to certain fears that the students might have (ibid. p. 225). It is in relation to these fears that Hanna proposes changes in the classroom that she calls an "emotionally honest classroom environment" (ibid.). The article takes inspiration from a novel study of *Tuesdays with Morrie* (ibid. p. 224).

While Hanna acknowledges there is more than one reason for student disengagement, the suggested methodology of the article revolves around factors that the teacher can control, such as the "learning environment a teacher creates within a classroom" (2014. p. 224). Hanna suggest that creating an environment where the students feel welcome and comfortable can be a successful strategy in engaging students (ibid.). This is based on the assumption that there is a certain "detachment" from the situation, from the student's perspective, based on the continuous attempt to uphold individuality and social standing within the class as a social group (ibid.). Attempting to bridge the gap between teacher and student involves building a professional relationship in the classroom. Hanna argues that this relationship needs to be built on trust and honesty (ibid.).

Hanna asserts that the best way to create an emotionally honest classroom is "by ensuring that trust is established and that risk taking is not only an option but also an action encouraged by the teacher" (2014. p. 225). She goes on to describe four ways to achieve this: "these four approaches include modeling the behavior I wish to see from my students, weaving humor into the fabric of the classroom, holding myself accountable for my own errors, and overcoming the fear that comes from showing both weakness and strength in front of students." (ibid.). This style of teaching can be juxtaposed to archaic teaching styles, where the focus lay on maintaining a social distance between teacher and student based on the teacher's authority and infallibility.

The emotionally honest classroom described in Hanna's article seems like an appropriate setting for engaging students who would otherwise have the potential of becoming disengaged. An environment like the one described seems promising, particularly in encouraging engagement through increasing interest and work ethic. Even though it does not directly solve the problems related to students who are disengaged due to a lack of prerequisite subject knowledge, this strategy may open up new alternatives. Indirectly, a communication process that focuses on trust and honesty has the potential to unravel some of the obstacles that such a student may face in the classroom. Through honest communication, the subject teacher is more likely to

discover what skills the student needs to develop and can begin adapting the classroom material towards this goal. In relation to Antonovsky's concept of a "sense of coherence", we could say that such communication is directly aimed at providing student with the tools to handle all three areas that lead to an internal sense of coherence; comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness (1987. p. 19).

Schussler's article "Beyond Content: How Teachers Manage Classrooms to Facilitate Intellectual Engagement for Disengaged Students" deals with different classroom strategies for dealing with disengaged students. She argues that the most efficient way of engaging these types of students is through intellectually stimulating the students in the classroom. (Schussler, 2009. p. 115). The article is focused on empirical material from a specific high school in the United States following the so called "Middle School" concept where schools work in close cooperation with local colleges (ibid.). Schussler uses direct quotes from students of the school to argue for three main factors, which she argues are fundamental in creating the right conditions for intellectually stimulating education. These factors are: 1. There are opportunities for students to succeed. 2. Flexible avenues exist through which learning can occur. 3. Students are respected as learners because teachers convey the belief that students are capable of achieving academic success (ibid.). Schussler's motivation for using student quotes is to contest what she believes to be a tendency within educational research to ignore student voices.

In order for the teacher to create the right conditions to fulfil the three requirements for intellectually stimulating education, Schussler argues that teachers need to "challenge their students at appropriate levels, provide academic support, use instructional techniques that convey excitement for the content, and make learning relevant" (2009. p. 116). This could be seen categorized as pedagogical content knowledge that the teacher needs to develop. She proceeds to go through the details in taking the necessary steps towards this, such as the necessity of seeing the student as an individual, different methods for learning, formative assessment, and differentiated instruction (ibid. p. 118). Schussler concludes by stating that more schools throughout the education system should work on creating an environment for teachers to truly get to know their students, thus increasing the likelihood of engagement (ibid. p. 120).

Maintaining the attitude that all students are capable of academic success is something to strive for, but it does not ultimately solve the problem of those students who are disengaged due to a lack of prerequisite knowledge. Such an attitude is indeed necessary to ensure that all students are given the chance to flourish, however, as previously stated, teaching is a process that is mutually dependant; both teacher and student need to work together. The students themselves need to believe that they have the personal capacity needed to achieve academic success. However, disengaged students with a lack of prerequisite knowledge need more than being told that they can achieve success; they

also need to be provided with the tools and knowledge required to overcome the initial threshold. Here, further methods and strategies are required for establishing ways of providing students with the necessary tools for acquiring knowledge. The following subsection includes articles that focus on methods and strategies that could be potentially useful to encourage students to acquire such tools.

Research focusing on the student perspective

Other academic articles on disengaged students take a different approach and focus, primarily by viewing the phenomena through a student perspective. In this section, I discuss two relevant articles that focus primarily on the student in the disengagement situation.

Goodson and Crick's article "Curriculum as narration: tales from the children of the colonized" deals with the method of narrative as "a core pedagogical tool in enquiry-based learning." (2009. p. 225). The article references a research project in New South Wales, Australia, where disengaged students from an indigenous community were primarily taught using enquiry-based-learning (ibid.). The article concludes that the narrative element in education, and the curriculum, has a strong impact on the formation of identity and agency in the students (ibid. p. 135). Goodson and Crick argue that the need for "meaning-making" and purpose is linked to student identity and agency and that both are needed for engagement (ibid. p. 125). Thus, the authors argue that in order for students to become engaged, they need to feel like they are in control of their own learning. This can be related to Antonovsky's idea of meaningfulness as an important factor in the "sense of coherence" the student feels when taking on an assignment (1987. p. 19). If a student sees an activity or assignment as inherently meaningful in how it delivers agency, and has the ability to relate personally, it increases the chance that the student will engage to a higher degree. To see a connection between personal narrative and a sense of agency is not too far-fetched.

Enquiry-based learning implies presenting students with cases, scenarios, or problems through the methodology of narratives instead of presenting them with facts and knowledge (Goodson & Crick, 2009. p. 226). According to Goodson and Crick, narrative plays a central pedagogic role in this process (2009. p. 225). The authors conclude that narration is a way of creating meaning; to both tell and listen to stories, we have to engage and to interact (ibid. p. 232). In the project described in the article, students had to use personal stories in the education process. By focusing the education process on an activity where the students used a personal experience, the authors argue that the students became active in the pursuit of knowledge instead of passive receivers (ibid. p. 234). Therefore, through this method, it can be argued that the student achieves a greater sense of agency in their own learning progress compared to the "traditional" learning situation in which the subject teacher actively chooses the what and the how's

of the learning progress. It should be stressed, however, that any classroom situation requires active participation from both teacher and student. It is also apparent that the method requires a number of things from the teacher, namely support to help the students use personal experiences and stories in an educational way, and to help the students understand how their personal narratives can be applied to the task at hand. The concept of “scaffolding” comes to mind; the educational situation in which a teacher facilitates learning by identifying how much a student needs to progress to the next level (“Scaffolding,” 2015).

Nicholson and Putwain’s article “Facilitating re-engagement in learning: A disengaged student perspective” deals with “affective and cognitive, as well as behavioural, engagement” (2015. p. 37). The study is built on 35 semi-structured interviews with secondary school students who are attending a so called “alternative provision secondary school”, which was “established for students who have stopped attending mainstream school” (ibid. pp. 37, 38). The school in the study was designed to have smaller class sizes with an increased number of teachers in the room (ibid. p. 38). The authors use “interpretative phenomenological analysis” to look at the results of the interviews. From this material, the authors conclude that “key facilitators of engagement were positive student-staff relationships and low student staff ratios” (ibid.). They also bring up “treating students with respect, non-punitive behaviour management, offering flexible routes to learning, teachers conveying a belief that academic success is possible and teaching material that is perceived to be relevant to the student” as important factors in engagement (ibid.).

In the article, Nicholson and Putwain argue that there is a link between affective and cognitive engagement and successful behavioural engagement (2015. p. 38). They also assert that research on the topic has focused more on the behavioural side rather than on the phenomenon of disengagement itself (ibid.). In the study, the previously disengaged students cited smaller class sizes and more availability of help as some of the reasons why they felt like they were more engaged (ibid.). Furthermore, the students felt that “the level of intellectual challenge was appropriate and that they were more likely to work well if they found the topic interesting or enjoyable”. In terms of the student and teacher relationship, the students felt that a strong relationship had “significantly facilitated their re-engagement with education” (ibid. p. 39). Students cited mutual respect, a genuine desire to help, and positive encouragement as some of the most important factors in this relationship (ibid.). The authors conclude by stating that the methods used in the alternative provision secondary school should be applied to “mainstream schools” as this would likely lead to an increase in engagement (ibid. p. 40).

Although this does seem like a probable outcome, it should be noted that the resources mentioned in this article, including the increased number of teachers in a room and

smaller class sizes, would likely be challenging, if not impossible, to achieve across a school system like in Sweden, due to a lack of public funding (Bergling, 2019).

Intermediate summary

A brief summary of previous research and theory on methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students is made here before progressing to the discussion of how disengagement is manifest and handled in practice, as illustrated by teacher's lived experience. Looking at previous research on the topic, a few observations on common themes and strategies can be made. The three themes that stand out the most are recapitulated below.

An often-reoccurring theme throughout research aimed both at developing pedagogical content knowledge as well as the research focusing on the student perspective is the relationship between teacher and student. This relationship is seen as a key factor in engaging students in the classroom by Ennis (2000), Hanna (2014), Schussler (2009), and Nicholson and Putwain (2015). A strong relationship built on honest and efficient communication is important for many reasons, both in terms of directly engaging students, but also in terms of providing the teacher with tools to engage students. Most noticeably, Hanna speaks of creating a classroom environment that is built on honesty, trust, and accountability between teacher and students (2014. p. 224). Not only does this bridge the gap between the two parties, but it also eases any fears a student may have about failing that would otherwise result in a state of disengagement (ibid. p. 225). For Schussler, the relationship is important for facilitating intellectually stimulating education (2009. p. 115). This is achieved by the teacher respecting the students as learners and conveying the belief that students can achieve academic success (ibid.). Lastly, Nicholson and Putwain highlight a mutual respect and strong positive encouragement as the most important parts of the relationship between teacher and students (2015. p. 39).

Another reoccurring theme is the focus on the teaching material used in the education process. This is linked to engagement through how successfully the teacher can select and adapt the material and its difficulty level, dependant on the course curriculum and the student group. Schussler (2009) and Nicholson and Putwain (2015) highlight the importance of engaging students through relevant material that challenges the student academically, while still maintaining the student's motivation by working with material that the students can personally relate to or have an interest in. Schussler highlights the need to "challenge students at appropriate levels, provide academic support, use instructional techniques that convey excitement for the content, and make learning relevant" (2009. p. 116). Furthermore, in their study, Nicholson and Putwain found that students felt like "the level of intellectual challenge was appropriate" in an alternative school form where focus was on engaging previously disengaged students (2015. p. 39).

Finally, previous research tends to look at how teachers can make the education more meaningful. In Goodson and Crick (2009), Ennis (2000), and Nicholson and Putwain's (2015) research, the suggested method for achieving this is by creating an education that is personally relevant to the students. In Goodson and Crick, this is achieved through the pedagogy of narrative which claims to provide students with a sense of agency over their own learning, making engagement more likely (2009. p. 225). They assert that the need for "meaning-making" and purpose is linked to student identity and agency, and that both are needed for engagement (ibid. p. 125). In Ennis, a similar approach called theme-based curriculum is used instead to develop a pronounced and relevant connection to the student's daily lives (2000. pp. 122–123). Finally, Nicholson and Putwain found that previously disengaged student became engaged when working with material that they felt that they could relate to, and "that they were more likely to work well if they found the topic interesting or enjoyable" (2015. p. 39).

Disengaged students in teacher's lived experience

In this sub-chapter, an empirical review and discussion of the material collected for this thesis is carried out. The aim is to present the findings of the empirical material, compare it to the discussion in the theoretical review, and use that comparison to problematize and evaluate the previously discussed methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students. I also make use of Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of *flow* and Antonovsky's (1987) concept of a *sense of coherence* to study the empirical material.

During the placement periods on the supplementary teacher training program, as well as in previous substitute teaching assignments, I encountered and taught students who, for various reasons, can be described as disengaged. In this section, I reflect on my own encounters with disengaged students and the material from the two interviews conducted with a subject teacher on the topic of disengaged students. The empirical findings are categorized into three different factors, each with an impact on the student's engagement in the classroom; the social factor, the subject factor, and the digital factor.

As mentioned in the introduction chapter, the type of disengaged students that I encountered during my own teaching experience cover a variety of categories, with the most prevalent being the student who is disengaged because of a lack of prerequisite knowledge. The second most prevalent was the student who is disengaged through lack of interest. In my experience, the latter is usually a result of the former, and it is not at all unusual that these two categories overlap. As mentioned before, *disengagement* is a complex socio-psychological phenomenon that takes many forms (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015. pp. 4–5). There are very few students who exhibit disengaged behaviour due to a lack of prerequisite knowledge who can still be said to have an interest in the subject. I have, however, encountered quite a number of students who lack the prerequisite

knowledge but still maintain and display a steady interest in the subject, or in the education process. These students would rarely exhibit disengaged behaviour and so I would struggle to categorize them as disengaged. Here, the difference lies in the behavioural manifestations. There are, of course, examples of a reverse condition; students who possess the required skills, and more, but, for various reasons, are uninterested in engaging in the education process. In many of these cases, I find that the reason for student disengagement, even if they possess the prerequisite knowledge to engage and succeed, is the student's lack of interest in the specific subject, for example English, or in some cases, a lack of interest in the pedagogic content of a specific lesson, for example reading comprehension. Many of my students have expressed themselves negatively when given a reading comprehension assignment and have questioned the meaningfulness of the task. I have also found that some students have a stronger preference towards other subjects, such as science or technology, and seem to not prioritize language subjects as a result of this.

By Antonovsky's concept of a *sense of coherence*, it is possible to partially explain both types of disengaged students. To remain unaffected by stress in a given situation, Antonovsky asserts that three factors need to be fulfilled: *comprehensibility*, *manageability*, and *meaningfulness* (1987. p. 19). Failure to fulfil any of these three factors will lead to a loss of the internal *sense of coherence*, which will result in stress. I posit that, as a result of this stress, the affected student will disengage from the given assignment as a psychological coping mechanism. Disengagement becomes the natural response when facing an otherwise too stressful situation. This can occur through a failure of the student to believe they have the necessary skills to carry out the assignment, or as a result of the student believing that any attempt to handle the situation would be meaningless. While failures in both the sense of *manageability* as well as *meaningfulness* is probable for a disengaged student who lacks prerequisite knowledge, the latter would be easier to apply to a disengaged student who lacks interest in the subject. While both types of disengaged students fail to see any meaningfulness in trying to handle the situation, turning instead to disengagement, they do so for significantly different reasons. The resulting psychological stress of the situation can be attributed as a direct result of different underlying causes. While the student who lacks, or at least believes that they lack, prerequisite knowledge finds themselves in a state of stress due to the perceived impossibility of managing the situation, the student who lacks interest finds themselves in a state of stress due to the perceived meaninglessness of the situation. Antonovsky's first factor, *comprehensibility*, therefore, becomes even more important (ibid.). If a student is able to fully comprehend the nature of the assignment, there should be a greater chance that the student will be able to understand the purpose of the task and what tools they need to successfully complete it. Thus, I believe that *comprehensibility* contributes to *manageability* and the creation of *meaningfulness*.

During the first interview with the subject teacher, who is a language instructor, we started by briefly discussing the term *disengaged students*. They pointed out that:

It's not a term that I would use myself. Rather, we would mostly talk about, perhaps, unfocused students, or students with concentration difficulties, or you could say that they might have learning difficulties. These are the things that makes them disengaged. All those terms are underlying causes for why you might disengage as a student. (Subject teacher).

They noted that sometimes the language and particular expression used by a teacher can influence the way the students act and view themselves in and around the classroom, and so it would be unproductive to openly call them disengaged. A *disengaged student*, to them, is a student who "is inactive in class, does not participate in activities, and does not ask any questions; overall passive" (ibid.). When asked about the underlying reasons or factors for student disengagement, the subject teacher agrees that a lack of prerequisite knowledge is the most common reason for disengagement. Further, they link this disengagement to a perception from the student that their difficulties are not taken seriously and not being given enough attention by the teacher, and this results in an act of disengagement:

You're usually engaged in what you're good at, and if you have great difficulties in keeping up with the education process, and you also feel like the teacher is not acknowledging those difficulties; that feeds disengagement. I have difficulties believing that it would work in any other way. There must be a clear correlation there. (Subject teacher)

When talking about disengagement due to a disinterest in the subject or due to a poor attitude to education and school in general, they assert that the latter – in their experience – is more often than not connected to other factors, such as a subtler lack of prerequisite knowledge or having previous experience of not being taken seriously by an authoritative figure, like a teacher (ibid.). In my second interview with the subject teacher, they argued that sometimes it is not a case of disinterest, but rather of students who have high prerequisite skills which exceed the level required, and thus the students become disengaged due to an attitude of feeling like they do not need to put effort in to acquire skills that they already have: "If your prerequisite knowledge is much too high, you'll get bored and perhaps you'll feel that you're not being challenged" (Subject teacher).

When it comes to specific methods and strategies, the interviewed teacher argues that strategies for dealing with disengaged students are always contextually dependant, and dependent on the individual student:

Yes. I do believe that it's very contextually based, and individually dependent, it depends. It also depends on the way this motivation, or lack of engagement, is manifested in the classroom. If it's a student who is sitting idly at their desk at the far end of the classroom, that requires a certain strategy from my side, but if I see a student who is running around and is disturbing their fellow students as a result of their own disengagement, a different strategy might be required, even if it is the same underlying problem at core. (Subject teacher)

Thus, strategies and methods for dealing with disengagement must always correspond to the underlying reason for the disengagement, or it will not be an effective response (ibid.). During my second interview with the subject teacher, I asked again about the manifestations of disengagement and they noted that it is rarely a case of “inactivity”, but rather engaging in something “they shouldn’t be doing” (ibid.). They noted that in the digital classroom it is common for student to resort to “playing with their phone”, or “chatting with a friend” (ibid.). The teacher also noted that disengagement can often manifest as procrastination (ibid.). In the first interview, I asked about the most efficient tool to tackle disengagement and they stated that they have a great deal of trust in the social interaction between student and teacher:

The conversation is what I feel that you can achieve the most with. When you’re working with people, the conversation is most important, it’s about asking. And since we are dealing with students who are above the age of 15 [years] it’s usually possible to ask students about what’s going on: “How would you like to solve this situation? Because it’s untenable for me, for your classmates, and for you in the long term”. (Subject teacher)

The social factor, where I include the relationship between teacher and student as well as the social dynamic of the group, is discussed in the section below.

The social factor

As seen in the theoretical review, methods and strategies for dealing with disengaged students are very much context-based and usually vary from student to student depending on their need and underlying reason for lack of engagement (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015; Goodson & Crick, 2009). Another factor that further complicates things for the teacher is the likelihood of more than one disengaged student in the classroom, and the likelihood that the disengaged students in the classroom are found in different categories of disengagement (Subject teacher). This might sound more complicated than it actually is. In my teaching, I found that a common situation in the language classroom is one where you encounter one or two disengaged students because of a lack of prerequisite knowledge, and additional disengaged students because of a lack of interest. There is also a high likelihood that there are other students in the classroom who are socially prone to disengagement if influenced or pressured by other students (ibid.). The ensuing situation in this particular case is an increasing number of students in the classroom becoming disengaged or, at the very least, procrastinating. Disengagement, therefore, has the possibility of feeding more disengagement. In situations like these, “a certain amount of self-drive is necessary” for the students in the classroom, as it is unlikely the teacher will have enough time and resources to personally assist every student (ibid.). This illustrates how all classrooms are social in nature, and that education and learning are, in many ways, social processes (Illeris, 2007. p. 22; Dahlkvist, 2012. p. 91). In the social environment of the language classroom, relationships between people take centre stage and, as established in the

theoretical review, the social environment of a classroom can have a significantly positive effect on engagement.

Part of the social setting described above is primarily the relationship between the teacher and the students, as well as the relationships between students. This forms the social dynamic of the group (Dahlkwist, 2012. pp. 81–83). As mentioned in the introduction chapter, trust, honesty, and reliability are some of the keywords that I have personally chosen to put most weight behind when it comes to the engaging the students in my own classroom. These keywords are, of course, vital ingredients in the relationship between teacher and student, but they are also applicable to the relationship between the students in a group. Trust, honesty, and reliability is not something that appears suddenly in a group of people, rather it is something that develops over time through active and mutual effort by the group’s participants (Hanna, 2014. pp. 227–228). Much like any relationship, it is important that the efforts to establish and develop this relationship be mutual, from both teacher and student. In my experience, the efforts for developing these features are best carried out through continuous and consistent communication and interaction in the classroom. Relationship factors, like trust, honesty, and reliability, are developed through consistency and hard work from both teacher and student. Building relationships based on these qualities likely increases both performance and attendance through increased engagement (Subject teacher). This is also similar to what Schussler and Hanna discuss concerning establishing a communication between teacher and student that leads to a teacher getting to know their students and establishing strategies for planning and implementing the education process (Schussler, 2009; Hanna, 2014).

From a student’s point of view, the social setting of the classroom and the relationship to the teacher are both key factors in how engaged they are in school, more specifically the importance of “being listened to and being respected” (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015. p. 7). However, Hancock and Zubrick note that “while students see relationships as foundational to their ongoing engagement or to becoming engaged and maintaining engagement, teachers are much less likely to cite relationship formation and maintenance as instrumental to the student engagement process” (ibid.). This apparent gap between teacher and student perception on disengagement is regrettable. Evidently, further efforts need to be made here to increase levels of understanding between teachers and disengaged students. Such a gap likely exists as a result of teachers wanting to maintain a certain professional distance between themselves and their students (Hanna, 2014. p. 125). This can manifest as strict behavioural rules in a classroom setting. The authoritative nature of the gap between teacher and student is also something that can contribute to disengagement for some students (Dahlkwist, 2012. pp. 104, 116–118). This is further supported by the findings of Nicholson and Putwain, whose work shows that previously disengaged students responded better to non-punitive behaviour management (2015. p. 37).

The relationship and communication between teacher and student were discussed extensively during my two interviews with the subject teacher. According to them, the conversation, or communication, between teacher and student is primarily directed towards making the student feel like they have been seen, and for encouraging and motivating the student, stating that “it’s vital for all types of education, that you feel comfortable, welcome, and seen” (Subject teacher). At the same time, they point out that there is much variation from student to student in how to achieve this, and that such a conversation is always contextually bound (ibid.). When it comes to encouraging disengaged students, I asked whether it would be advisable to focus on a few specific external motivators, such as final grades and future work prospects, so as to clarify it in terms of the goals and grading criteria of the course, or subject, of what the potential ensuing negative consequences of disengagement might be. The teacher conceded that external motivators can sometimes be useful but stressed that “it’s dependent on knowing that the student is actually able to deliver. Because if the student cannot deliver, they will end up feeling under more pressure” (ibid.). The student in this case would be a student who is disengaged due to a lack of prerequisite knowledge. Instead, they suggest, much in line with the research of Nicholson and Putwain, that communication based on statements of support, of positive statements, and offers to help the student with a realistic and organised plan of reaching the goals, would be much more beneficial in such a situation (ibid.). This type of communication is also similar to what Schussler suggests for intellectually stimulating education, especially in terms of students being respected as learners with teachers consistently conveying the belief that students are capable of succeeding (2009. p. 115). The teacher also asserted that any communication regarding “external motivators”, such as grades and future work prospect, needs to be based on the student having “internal motivators”, such as an interest in the subject, and “if they don’t have it, this discussion regarding grades and future work doesn’t go very far. It becomes too abstract for them, *“we are not there yet, I can’t see this in front of me, it doesn’t mean anything for me right now”.*” (ibid.).

As mentioned above, the teacher interviewed for this thesis believes in the social interaction between teacher and student as the most efficient tool to deal with disengaged students, for both prevention and as a way to resolve disengagement (Subject teacher). They also mention using conversation as an investigative tool to create understanding and dialogue, stating that you “have to be open for any kind of answer you might receive from them” (ibid.). The importance of malleability and understanding the student’s specific needs were some of the factors mentioned by the teacher for engaging in a productive conversation. Thus, once the teacher has improved their understanding of the disengaged student, they might have an easier time in providing a path towards engaging the student. Accordingly, the communication between student and teacher plays a fundamental role in creating the classroom environment (Dahlkwist, 2012. p. 89). The interviewed teacher pressed the importance

of creating a classroom environment in which the students felt that they: "...dare to exist, dare to ask questions, dare to be themselves and to sometimes make mistakes. This is the only type of classroom environment in which successful learning can occur" (Subject teacher). So, students need to feel like they can talk to each other and to the teacher; to make jokes, and to be comfortable in the classroom in order for learning to commence (ibid.). This bears a strong resemblance to what Hanna (2014) found in her research (pp. 227–228).

When asked about other preventive methods of tackling disengagement, the subject teacher stressed that an important part of being a teacher is erasing the misguided belief that teachers are merely authoritarian experts with an agenda of policing and keeping students in check:

Some students have this attitude that it's "us and them", that us teachers do certain things to "get them", and that's something manifested like "Yeah, you don't like me". There's always someone each year with that mentality, and I think that it's very important as a teacher to progress from that stage as soon as possible. By actually displaying that "we're on the same team", that we're as dependant on them as they are on us, to get things to work. (Subject teacher)

This mentality most likely originates in the duality of the teacher's role as both educator and assessor. The teacher argued that relationship building, and a great display of humility, are key to eliminating this mentality and illustrating that the teacher and students are on the same team, working together towards a common goal rather than adversaries (ibid.). The teacher stressed the importance of:

...me being clear about being there to help them, there's no intrinsic value in me being a teacher, that I should be the one who knows best in the classroom, that you should not put up your hand if you do not know the answer. You [the teacher] have to be clear that if you ask for help, you will get it. (ibid.).

This will increase the likelihood for a strong relationship between teacher and student where the latter feels like they always can reach out to the teacher for help. The teacher also stressed the importance of illustrating this in the classroom by continuously moving around and asking students how they are getting on, and addressing all student questions consistently "regardless if they're potential A-students or potential F-students" (ibid.). Instead, the teacher argues that a bigger obstacle in students feeling like they can speak freely and expose weakness is their classmates (ibid.). Especially in classrooms where the students are new and do not know each other very well, it might be difficult for students to feel comfortable exposing any weaknesses and potentially losing social standing in the group (ibid.). If a student were to be mocked by their peers "it has the potential of being utterly devastating for a student who's already feeling weak from the start and experiences a discomfort in expressing themselves in, for example, English" (ibid.). Here, it is possible to talk of "saving face" or of Goffman's term "facework", where individuals take to avoidance strategies to preserve a certain

image of themselves in a group (Goffman, 1955). The avoidance strategies take precedent over other activities and as a result, disengagement is more likely. Thus, it is important for a subject teacher to create a classroom environment built on a feeling of mutual support and encouragement, where the students feel comfortable around each other and allow themselves to make mistakes in front of each other instead of feeling alienated.

The subject factor

As is clear from the discussion above, when talking about disengaged students in a language classroom setting it is important to note the specific characteristics of such a classroom. A language classroom is a classroom where a language is being learnt and used (Burns, 2019. pp, 1–2). The latter is, of course, instrumental for the fulfilment of the former. Language, whether it is a first or second language, needs to be constantly exercised and used, practically and socially, in the classroom in order for learning to occur (ibid. p. 2). This implication makes the language classroom a truly interactive setting. Thus, it can be said that the educational process in the language classroom requires significant social contact between teacher and student, and between students. Areas where the student may operate more independently are within writing and reading skills. Even in these areas, I believe that initial instruction and feedback, with some sort with interaction between student and teacher, is necessary. As a consequence, the level of engagement will differ between these areas, as will the level of engagement, or disengagement.

In terms of disengaged students, it becomes clear that a unique environment, such as the language classroom, may present additional challenges. From the perspective of the teacher, the education process itself demands almost constant interactions, and continuous engagement is therefore necessary for learning to occur. Accordingly, disengagement directly hinders the educational process of the language classroom. Of course, this is true in the education processes of most subjects. What may perhaps separate the language classroom from other subject classrooms is how noticeable the disengagement becomes due to the social nature of language acquisition. From my experiences of teaching, disengagement is more noticeable during any form of social interaction than during individual work, assignments, and teacher-led lectures. Although, as noted above, there are exceptions in the language classroom as well, such as during writing and reading exercises. Even in these situations, disengagement manifesting as disruptive behaviour is quite noticeable.

When it comes to methods and strategies for responding to the subject specific effects on disengagements, I have experienced that the most efficient strategies revolve around intelligibility, communication, and motivation. In any educational process, intelligibility is perhaps the most important focal point for teaching (Lindström & Pennlert, 2009. p.

58). As already established in the section above, if a student does not understand the what, how, or why of a certain task, disengagement becomes increasingly likely. This is understandable if we refer to Antonovsky's concept of a *sense of coherence* where an understanding of the task can be connected to *comprehensibility*, but also *manageability*. To evaluate if we have the right tools for a certain task, we first need to understand the task itself (Antonovsky, 1987. p. 19). I have found this to be especially true for disengaged students who lack prerequisite knowledge. In my teaching experience, the risk of disengagement is much higher if students with low prerequisite knowledge fail to see how, and with what skills and resources, they can accomplish a given task.

Consequently, an efficient communication process is a key factor for intelligibility. The language instructor needs to be able to clearly communicate the purpose, process, and goals of the task at hand. The teacher also needs to be able to detect when to sit down with a student and provide encouragement in the belief that they have the necessary skills to perform a certain assignment (Subject teacher). It might also be necessary to convince students of the value in continuing to work hard in the classroom and continuing to practice even when they have not achieved the results they want:

As a teacher, you can make a difference by removing a bit of pressure by saying something like “you have next lesson as well”, or “this is something that we’re going to do several times, today is just exercise. So, relax, everything will work out”. (ibid.)

The latter is important for the teacher to identify situations where a student might disengage if they fail to see the meaningfulness of an assignment, even after several attempts. I believe that developing and perfecting this communication is a clear path towards engaging students in the classroom. However, this alone is not enough. Students also need to be motivated enough to perform the given task.

Motivation is a complex phenomenon that differs from person to person, from subject to subject, and even due to other external factors, such as time of day or the mood of the student (Dahlkwist, 2012. pp. 29–30). Again, we can use Antonovsky's concept of a *sense of coherence* (1987). It becomes apparent that part of the communication between teacher and student should focus on reinforcing, or supporting, the student's sense of *comprehensibility*, *manageability*, and *meaningfulness*. By explaining the what, how, and why of a given assignment, the teacher will, if successful, satisfy the student's need for both *comprehensibility*, by thoroughly and pedagogically explaining the purpose of the assignment and how it should be carried out, and *meaningfulness*, by explaining how the newly acquired skills can be used in practice. In terms of *manageability*, there is a need for constant and continuous communication between teacher and student to provide encouragement and feedback, with a focus on positive reinforcement and realistic goal setting in learning. I posit that a significant part of the communication between student and teacher is linked to an understanding of individual student

motivation, as this is something that differs from student to student. This became apparent to me during my own teaching experience as well as in the interviews with the subject teacher.

In my second interview with the subject teacher, we discussed the impact of the characteristics of the language classroom on student engagement. The subject teacher felt that the language classroom did not necessarily stand out compared to other classrooms in terms of the focus on social interaction, arguing that even in subjects like science and mathematics, which are traditionally prone to individual assignments, continuous social interaction and verbal communication during the education process is prevalent today and, in many cases, a foundation for assessment (Subject teacher). They did, however, acknowledge that language classrooms with a large concentration of non-native speakers [of Swedish] might experience a different kind of complexity in communication (ibid.). Overall, the subject teacher did not feel that the students in a language classroom were under more pressure to communicate than in other classrooms, but that it sometimes results in students resorting back to Swedish whenever they felt unable to communicate in English:

Of course, a certain frustration might occur for students who feel like they're not able to express themselves. But I think that most of our students, they would start speaking Swedish instead in that case. (ibid.).

The subject teacher and I also briefly discussed how motivation and engagement is connected in the language classroom. They believe the two are closely interlinked, but not necessarily always correlated as "there might be cause for a student to be engaged even though they're not motivated" (ibid.). The teacher also mentioned that this is something that can be contextually dependant:

You can become engaged in a specific moment without feeling fully motivated. I don't know, is it possible to be unmotivated and yet feel engaged? I am thinking that you can engage in the spur of the moment, but there's always something that motivates you. (ibid.).

A disengaged student may become situationally motivated during class because of how the education process runs during an individual lesson. They bring up an example from their own teaching where a disengaged student with a distrust in the teacher-student authority relationship become engaged in a task where the relationship was less obvious:

If you imagine a student sitting down and engaging in a session of "card game" [a vocabulary game], it might be that they're engaging in the game because it's something that's different from what we usually do in class, as well as being able to interact with friends and the teacher sitting a distance apart. This removes the element of the traditional teacher-student situation, and it's not a recognizable learning situation. (ibid.).

The context of the situation blurs the lines between a casual social situation and a learning situation with an authoritative relationship between teacher and student, simply because the teacher has stepped aside. The teacher also states that such a situational

motivator might eventually “produce a long-term interest in the subject”, simply due to the enjoyment of the situation (ibid.). In the first interview, we also discussed the importance of providing the students with a variety of different tasks and methods for learning. The teacher asserted that this variation in method and assignment is vital for every student to “feel like they some time or another have a realistic chance of showing what they’re capable of, given the right circumstances” (ibid.). I take this to mean that different students perform better when given different types of assignments and ways of working in the classroom. Thus, a variation in these categories ensures that contextually based and situation dependant motivation is evened out across students over time. In relation to Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of *flow*, it also becomes apparent that variation plays a role in terms of providing students with the chance of finding the right combination between difficulty level of the task and their own skill level (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990. p. 27). For further discussion of this, see below.

In terms of the language classroom, each student will also have a different relationship to the language being taught. From my teaching experience, I have found that this relationship depends on a number of factors, such as exposure to the language outside of the school environment, like at home or in popular culture. Future career goals and other external motivators will also likely play a role in how the student views the subject. The relationship the student has with the language being taught will ultimately play a significant role in motivating them. I believe that even if a student has a very strong relationship with the target language, acting as a strong positive personal motivator, motivation in the language classroom is still necessary. As noted in Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of the psychological state of *flow*, one of the most important factors when it comes to motivation in the language classroom is the difficulty level of the task (1990. p. 27). A misconfiguration in a task’s difficulty level can have negative consequences on student motivation (ibid. p. 31). This works both ways; if the difficulty level is too low or too high, chances are it will affect motivation, and, in effect, the engagement of the student. This is something that the subject teacher needs to take into consideration on a daily basis, when it comes to planning, and teaching, lessons. To avoid situations that might result in demotivated and disengaged students, teachers have to plan lessons that, while maintaining an appropriate level in accordance with the course curriculum, have enough room for both the over and underachieving student to engage in the learning process (ibid.). Of course, this rests on the foundation of the teacher having previous knowledge of the various skill levels of the students in the group. This knowledge is built up in different ways, for example through different types of assessment and through communication with the students.

From a student’s point of view, Hancock and Zubrick conclude that pedagogy and content are two major factors in engaging students in the classroom (2015. p. 43). This further asserts that a teacher’s pedagogical content knowledge is key when dealing with disengagement. In their report, they conclude that students indicate “having fun”, “a

disciplined learning environment”, and teachers who “make learning interesting” as factors for engagement (ibid.). Similar notions are mirrored in Nicholson and Putwain’s research (2015. p. 39). Interestingly for the social nature of the language classroom, Hancock and Zubrick also state that “too much writing” is a negative factor for engagement (2015. p. 43). This illustrates the importance of varied lesson planning. Of course, writing is an essential skill and integral to language instruction (Woodward, 2001. pp. 92–94). Thus, finding additional methods and strategies for dealing with disengagement specifically during a writing task is important. As discussed in the following section, digital tools have an impact on such tasks. If students already struggle to engage with writing tasks, it becomes even more important to minimize the potential risks for disengagement with digital tools like smartphones and computers.

The digital factor

Since the beginning of the 2010’s, elementary schools and upper secondary schools in Sweden have used computers and tablets as part of the education process (Säljö, Liberg, Lundgren, 2017. p. 192–193). The emergence, rise in popularity, and widespread availability of smartphones occurred in this decade. Such electronic devices are widely used in the Swedish classroom today, both as approved tools in the education process and as an arguable distraction when not sanctioned by a teacher (ibid.). Computers can be of great use to students when searching for information, researching words through an online dictionary, using text editors, and more. In the language classroom, computers are mostly used for the student to produce or read texts, or to engage in other exercises, such as listening comprehension. While digital tools can be a great help when used efficiently, they can also impact student engagement if used inappropriately. As briefly mentioned before, during my second interview with the subject teacher they mentioned that students who are already disengaged may start fiddling with their phones or turn to a friend instead of completing an assignment as a manifestation of disengagement (Subject teacher). However, research also suggests that access to smartphones and laptops can lead to disengagement without any underlying or pre-existing cause. Studies have shown that students find it difficult to focus on one task when able to access a screen during class (Gordon, 2020). There are also indications that personal devices, such as smartphones, can have a lasting impact on success, for example they may affect the student’s final grade (ibid.). Interestingly, it has also been found that long-term retention is the most affected area when students become distracted by smartphones (ibid.).

There seems to be an overconfidence in the belief that students have the ability and skill to use these digital tools to their own advantage (Jeffries, 2013). During my own teaching experience, I have witnessed multiple students who have been hindered, rather than empowered, by the use of laptops and smartphones in the classroom. Generally speaking, I noticed that students do not possess the necessary skills to use digital tools

in the most efficient way. From the student's perspective, this creates a portion of time unnecessarily spent trying to operate the technology or understand how to resolve technical issues. From a teacher's perspective, unnecessary time may be spent explaining and illustrating how the technology works. I have also experienced how disengaged students strategically use technology as a way of hiding their disengagement, or as a way of sanctioning their behaviour. This can be linked to the "unproductive classroom behaviours" that Hancock and Zubrick discuss as one manifestation of disengagement in the classroom (2015. p. 6). A common situation in the classroom involves a student using a computer or a smartphone to engage in other activities, such as playing online games, chatting with friends, or watching online videos. These activities are mostly undertaken while the student's screen is not visible to the teacher. When the teacher appears, the student can easily "switch" back to the original assignment to avoid detection. Thus, it can be concluded that the use of digital tools in the language classroom, while helpful and empowering if used appropriately, can add another dimension to the already complicated phenomena of *disengagement*, especially if the unproductive use of digital tools is the way that disengagement manifests.

There are, however, methods and strategies for efficiently using digital tools in the language classroom to avoid disengagement. I believe that the guiding principle in this case is to plan lessons and lesson segments with digital tools already in mind, in essence deciding at the planning stage exactly what digital tools should be used and how. If the students are to perform a writing task, the teacher needs to decide beforehand what tools are necessary for the task, such as whether laptops are permitted or if the students are to write by hand. For assessment purposes, it is also worthwhile to decide whether the student should submit their work, and if this needs to be done digitally. By incorporating such decisions in the planning stage, the teacher will, at least in part, avoid potential disruptive situations in the classroom. When it comes to devices like smartphones, which may be seen by some as merely disruptive, the teacher would be wise to enter the classroom with a set of rules or guidelines to follow. Ideally, the school will already have rules or guidelines in place for students to follow. If not, the teacher will need to decide whether they find it acceptable for the student to use a smartphone as a replacement for another digital tool, like a laptop. Most importantly, the teacher needs to decide how to act in these circumstances and whether their response should focus on communication or authority if digital tools are used unproductively. As seen in both the theory and in the empirical material, a communicative response with a focus on understanding and positive reinforcement is likely the most efficient response.

In my interviews with the subject teacher, we talked briefly about the impact of digital tools on the educational process in general, and then specifically with regards to disengaged students. The teacher states that "the computer is a working tool that they [the students] should always bring to every class, and of course that kind of availability

can result in them being able to do something else on the computer, something different from what we want them to do” (Subject teacher). More so, the smartphone has the potential of becoming a “significant distraction” for students who are already demotivated and displaying a high disengagement risk (ibid.). Stating that “for some students, the phone is much like an extension of themselves”, the teacher concludes that the students become very reluctant to forfeit the device for something else. Without an “internal drive”, it becomes even more difficult for these students to engage in the assignment at hand with the distraction caused by a smartphone (ibid.). The teacher calls for a school-wide policy on the use of devices like smartphones in the classroom, arguing that such a policy is necessary to increase the likelihood of engaging students (ibid.).

I think that it’s a pity that we haven’t taken a mutual decision about this and acquired the necessary material needed for storing student’s phones during class in an appropriate way. Because I think that it could contribute to an increased focus for some students when there is not much else to concentrate on rather than the teacher and the assignment. (ibid.)

In conclusion, digital competence should evidently be included in the teacher’s pedagogical content knowledge. This would include how best to use digital tools in the classroom, how to teach and develop digital skills, and how to deal with situations where digital tools are used unproductively by disengaged students.

Summary of the empirical findings

A brief summary of the empirical findings from teacher’s lived experience of methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students is made here before the conclusion chapter. A few observations can be made regarding reoccurring themes for managing disengagement throughout the empirical material.

A general implication of the methods and strategies discussed above in teacher’s lived experience is the set of requirements that are needed for applying practical solutions to a classroom setting. These requirements can be divided into physical requirements and pedagogical content knowledge. The physical requirements can be summarized in terms of the teaching material necessary to create assignments and tasks that can be adapted to students with varying levels of prerequisite knowledge to increase the chance of *flow*, relatable material to increase student motivation or to develop a sense of agency that results in a higher sense of meaningfulness, creation of material that promotes a classroom environment based on social interaction, and material that promotes the use of digital tools as educational assists rather than distractions. To organize, plan, and carry out all of the above, the teacher first needs to acquire firsthand experience and knowledge concerning their students; something which can only be done in the classroom.

When it comes to competence in terms of pedagogical content knowledge, the requirements are not as straightforward or perhaps not as easy to access as the above. From the discussion above, it seems that there is a further need for digital competence in an educational setting, for both teachers and students. Competence directed towards empowering students with the skills needed to use computers and other digital tools for academic purposes is needed, as is pedagogical content knowledge for teachers to utilize digital tools to engage students in the classroom. However, before this is possible, teachers should work on developing the relational competence needed to create classrooms in which students are engaged and motivated. Further reflections on this are found below and in the concluding chapter. In relation to *Antonovsky's* concept of a *sense of coherence*, the empirical material supports the notion that *comprehensibility* contributes to *manageability* and the creation of *meaningfulness*. This process is also part of the communication between teacher and student.

It is evident from the empirical material that disengagement is less likely when there is a resilient relationship between teacher and students built on respect and trust, as well as an efficient communication where the teacher understands each individual student's needs. This will also likely help the teacher when selecting appropriate material adapted to the students in the group. The subject teacher interviewed for this thesis points out the fact that the most efficient strategies for dealing with disengaged students in the classroom requires more in terms of time and resources (Subject teacher). According to the teacher, smaller class sizes would largely benefit engagement as the teacher would have more time to spend with each student, to sit down and walk them through an assignment that they might find challenging, "something which is not possible when there are twenty students in your class" (ibid.). Extra resources are more commonly available only if there are students in the group who have been diagnosed with a neurodevelopmental disorder (ibid.).

In conclusion, it should be noted that the method and strategies mentioned above are highly contextual and individually dependant and are therefore unsuitable for generalizing across all cases of student disengagement. In order for the methods and strategies to work, they need to be directed towards the underlying reason for disengagement. Firstly, the underlying reason for disengagement must be correctly identified and understood. The most efficient way to accomplish this seems to be through a relational approach where a teacher develops knowledge and understanding of their students. However, the interviews with the subject teacher also reveal that it is as important to work on creating a classroom environment in which students are comfortable around each other, allowing them to be authentic without fear of alienation from the group. This is important as disengagement can easily spread throughout social groups if left unresolved.

Conclusion

After examining methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students in the digital language classroom, through both a theoretical and empirical review, a few concluding remarks and observations can be made. In this section, I present those conclusions and suggest future venues of explorations on the topic of methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students in the digital language classroom.

In both the theoretical review and in teacher's lived experience, some themes for methods and strategies for engaging students in the classroom reoccur. They include, but are not limited to, the social environment of the classroom and the relationship and communicational aspects between teacher and student, an educational process that takes the individual into account and adapts tasks and assignments after the students' goals, abilities, and prerequisite knowledge, and finally, a pedagogy that centres on clarity, intelligibility, and communication. The latter can be clearly understood in reference to Antonovsky's concept of *sense of coherence*, where we see the act of disengagement as a psychological behaviour of self-preservation in a situation of stress. As a result, methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students need to result in a sense of *comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness*.

In terms of the digital language classroom, additional factors and characteristics have an impact on methods and strategies for dealing with disengaged students. These factors, complications, and also opportunities, mainly focus on the socially interactive nature of the language classroom and the multitude of tasks that ensue. In the language classroom, certain factors that affects engagement may play an even larger role than in other types of education, such as task difficulty, material, and variation. As a result, disengagement can be handled by adapting material and level of difficulty of assignments after individual student ability. However, due to the socially intense environment of the language classroom, any disengagement becomes more noticeable. There is a need to develop a digital competence as part of the teacher's pedagogical content knowledge. This includes the best way to use digital tools in the classrooms, how to teach and develop digital skills, and how to deal with situations where digital tools are used inappropriately by disengaged students.

When it comes to the discourse surrounding the term *disengaged students*, I have noted that it is a term widely used in theory, more so than in practice, where it can be seen to bear negative connotations. While the subject teacher discusses disengaged students and method and strategies for dealing with disengagement, they do so without using the actual term itself. This is partly due to the importance of honest communication and relationship building between teacher and student, where the usage of such a term would have damaging consequences. Instead, the focus in practice lies in preventive measures, such as creating emotionally honest classrooms, a working teacher-student

communication, as well as developing pedagogical content knowledge suitable for the digital language classroom. Instead of resorting to authoritarian responses with a heavy focus on rules and punitive measures, a relational focus enables a classroom environment in which teacher and student display mutual respect towards each other and work together toward the common goal of learning.

Preventive measures like relationship building, differentiated instruction, and providing students with the necessary tools to create a sense of agency in their own learning seem to be the most efficient ways of tackling disengagement. While it is still worthwhile and feasible to tackle disengagement after the fact, preventive measures lay the groundwork for a successful learning environment that benefits all, not just students who display a potential risk of disengagement. Relationship building with a focus on efficient and honest communication between teacher and student enables a classroom environment that encourages engagement and learning. Keywords such as humility, respect, and trust are also key factors in building a relationship between teacher and student, as well as between students themselves, by promoting honesty, exposure of weaknesses, and mutual support. It is also important for eliminating a “us and them” mentality where a disengaged student may view the teacher as an adversary instead of a supporter in learning.

To create a social environment in the classroom where students feel comfortable enough to commit to mistakes and errors in front of their fellow students is also an important step towards engagement. An efficient and honest communication between teacher and student enables the teacher to know their students and take any steps necessary to adapt the educational process towards the needs of the individual student. A significant part of the communication between student and teacher is linked to an understanding of individual student motivation, something which differs from student to student. Due to restrictions in time and resources, differentiated instruction and assessment is a good alternative to individually adapting tasks and assignments. Differentiated instruction increases both motivation and engagement as it raises the likelihood that students will have the chance to engage in a task or assignment that they are particularly interested or skilled in to achieve a state of *flow*. Efforts should also be made by the subject teacher to make the teaching material relatable to each individual student and create ways for students to use the material in their own way, thus creating a sense of agency in the student’s own learning.

Finally, the term *disengaged students* should be described for what it is: a complex socio-psychological phenomenon, not a static phenomenon or an inherent student personality trait. Much previous research has been too adamant on focusing on the behavioural side of disengagement rather than on the underlying factors.

Disengagement cannot merely be explained by socio-economic factors or previous education history, even if this is the case for many students. It is a problem rooted in

many underlying socio-psychological reasons and factors, such as maintaining a social standing in their social group, maintaining their own social identity, maintaining a distance from authority, and attempting to escape an overwhelming feeling of stress in a social situation. Faced with such a stressful situation, the affected student may disengage from the given assignment as a psychological coping mechanism. Disengagement becomes the natural response when facing a situation that would otherwise be too stressful. Understanding disengagement from this perspective enables a response centred on the student. Effective methods and strategies for engaging students in this scenario rely on creating a classroom environment where the student feels like they belong; they are seen, respected and understood. In such a classroom, students can communicate and engage freely with less fear of social consequence. This approach is a direct response to the underlying issue of disengagement, something which is fundamental as methods and strategies for dealing with disengagement are contextually dependant.

Future avenues of exploration and research on the topic of disengagement, and the methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students, should focus on bridging the gap between how the teacher and student understand disengagement. As previous research has shown, there are differences between teachers and students regarding the impact of relational approaches to engagement. Bridging this gap would also be beneficial for developing new strategies and pedagogical content knowledge for an age of education where digital tools are increasingly prominent in the language classroom.

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Appendices

1. Questions for the first interview

Reflections regarding the term “disengaged students”

- How would you define a disengaged student?
 - Is a lack of pre-requisite knowledge a bigger issue than attitude to education or interest in the subject when it comes to engagement in your classroom?
 - In your opinion, has the number of disengaged students in your classroom increased during your years as a subject teacher?
- From your perspective as a subject teacher, how is the difference between motivation and engagement manifested?

Methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students

- As a subject teacher, which methods and strategies do you use to engage disengaged students in your classroom?
 - In your opinion, what is the most important and efficient tool that you can use to tackle disengagement and supporting disengaged students?
- Do you feel like you have a sufficient amount of time and resources at your disposal to tackle the issue of disengagement in your classroom?
 - Are further resources needed, and if so, what kind of resources?
- Researchers discuss relational approaches and the communication between teacher and student as a possible route in engaging students.
 - What role do you feel that the teacher-student relationship, the communication of the same, involving trust and honesty, plays in engaging students?

Further questions

- Do you experience that the “digital classroom”, the wide availability and use of laptops and smartphones, have led to a change in terms of disengagement in your classroom?
 - Has this made the issue more prevalent, and if so, has it led to changes in methods and strategies for tackling disengagement?

2. Questions for the second interview

Further questions regarding the term “disengaged students”

- Which risk-factors do you experience as the most prevalent for disengagement?
Is there anything specific that is manifested in the classroom environment?
 - In your opinion, is socio-economic status a noticeable risk-factor for disengagement in the classroom?
- Disengagement is complex socio-psychological phenomena, what kind of disengaged behaviour have you experienced in your classroom?
 - What is the most prevalent type of behaviour; inactivity, disruptive activities, etc?
- In your capacity as a subject teacher, do you believe that preventive measures are the most efficient tool in tackling disengagement?
 - If so, what kind of preventive measures are most effective?
- The language classroom is unique in terms of its characteristics, with a heavy focus on social interaction, how do you think that this affect student engagement and disengagement?

Methods and strategies for engaging disengaged students

- In Antonovsky’s theory of a “sense of coherence”, comprehensibility, manageability, and meaningfulness are important factors and mental tools for preventing stressful situations, such as ones which can develop in a learning environment.
 - Is this something that can relate to actively using in your teaching?
- Regarding the factor of meaningfulness, do you have any methods or strategies for developing a sense of meaningfulness for your students, for example engaging the students in assignments in which they can personally relate to the content and etc.?
- Enquiry-based learning presents students with scenarios through narratives instead of presenting them with facts and knowledge. Through this, students can achieve a personal connection to the content. Researchers argue that this leads to students becoming active instead of passive in the pursuit of knowledge.
 - Is this something you have implemented in your own teaching?
- Csikszentmihalyi theory about “flow” regard a mental state in which a person engages at their top of their ability due to a perfect calibration between ability and the difficulty level of the task. This internal motivation results in a state of full concentration.
 - In what ways can you as a teacher provides ways for students to reach this state?