



RESEARCH REPORT | JANUARY 2021

Student, School, and Career Engagement

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT DEFINED

The concept of student engagement has been studied for decades (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Lawson & Lawson, 2013) in a number of contexts (Lam et al., 2014). Although extensive research has resulted in varied definitions in the literature (Eccles & Wang, 2012; Finn & Zimmer, 2012), student engagement, defined simply, refers to the attitudes and behaviors of students that lead them to feel and be successful in school (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Lam et al. (2014) assert that while there are a number of ways to define student engagement, the prevailing conceptualization is comprised of multiple typologies or constructs, which include students' sense of belonging and identity within school, school participation, and learning strategies. More recent research has revealed that student engagement is dynamic and malleable and engagement levels can fluctuate based on contextual and environmental factors (Quin, 2017).

IMPACT OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

Research indicates a number of positive student outcomes related to student engagement. For instance, Finn and Zimmer (2012) found significant positive correlations between academic and social engagement and performance in reading and math, as well as moderate correlations between academic and social engagement and high school graduation. In a meta-analysis of 69 independent studies, Lei, Cui, and Zhou (2018) also found positive correlations between student behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement and academic achievement. Other studies have positively linked student engagement to retention and increased attendance (Quin, 2017), perception of quality of school life (Thien & Razak, 2013), attitude toward math (Irvine, 2020), and future aspirations (Moreira, et al., 2018). These studies also indicate that there is no single best way to engage students in school. Instead, they point to different types of engagement that might influence student motivations or outcomes.



THE FOUR CONSTRUCTS OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Three types of student engagement—*affective, behavioral, and cognitive*—are prevalent in current literature (Lam et al., 2014). These three types of engagement are supported by the research of Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) and Finn and Zimmer (2012). They encompass a student’s involvement in school, feelings about teachers and students within the school, and effort on academic work. Gunuc and Kuzu (2015) expand the scope of engagement to more accurately describe the varying relationships between students and the learning environment. This expansion results in four constructs: *affective, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional* (Gunuc & Kuzu, 2015).

“*Research also indicates that regardless of the number of constructs, they do not operate in isolation. Rather, the constructs overlap and are dynamically interrelated within the individual.*

(Fung, Tan, & Chen, 2018; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004, p. 61).”

The following literature review describes in more detail each of the four constructs of student engagement and provides practical examples of how these constructs might manifest in the school or classroom.

AFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Affective engagement can be defined and measured as a student’s feelings toward school and toward learning in general (Finn, 1989; Lam et al., 2014; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Affective engagement includes a student’s attitudes and values as well as a full spectrum of emotions, including happiness, sadness, anxiety, and boredom (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Intrinsic motivation, which can be defined as motivation to complete something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, is a key component of affective engagement (Finn, 1993; Libbey, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000). School is a major part of a child’s life; therefore school becomes a factor in a student’s individual identity (Finn & Voelkl, 1993). As school becomes a bigger part of a student’s life, the student forms a sense of belonging within school, which influences how the student is motivated, engaged, and, ultimately, succeeds (Kahu, 2011; Libbey, 2004). When students have a positive attitude toward the school, they often have positive reactions toward classroom activities and learning in general. Their sense of belonging and engagement with the curriculum results in positive academic outcomes. Conversely, if students feel conflict or negative emotions toward the school environment, their enjoyment and appreciation of school declines (Birch & Ladd, 1997). These disaffected children might have negative school outcomes, such as behavioral problems or poor academic results, or they might even become rebellious toward peers and teachers (Skinner & Belmont, 1993).

BEHAVIORAL ENGAGEMENT

Behavioral engagement is defined and measured as a student’s effort in learning and participation in school activities (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Lam et al., 2014). In the literature, behavioral engagement is often separated into three parts (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris,



2004). The first part is related to student conduct, which is often defined as following the rules and norms of the classroom and school, as well as not engaging in disruptive behaviors (Finn, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997). The second part of behavioral engagement is the involvement of the student in academic tasks, or how much effort and contribution a student invests in academic tasks (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). The third part of behavioral engagement refers to a student's level of participation in school activities, such as student council or athletics (Finn, 1993). Students who maintain their schoolwork and partake consistently in extra-curricular activities are deemed as having high behavioral engagement (Lam et al., 2014). These students are continuously motivated to do well because of positive feedback from their teachers and peers through these activities (Miller et. al, 1996). Students who show low behavioral engagement often display negative school conduct or do not feel the need to participate in school activities. This disengagement can result in low academic scores and negative consequences, such as disciplinary action (Finn, Pannozzo, & Voelkl, 1995).

COGNITIVE ENGAGEMENT

Cognitive engagement measures how students regulate their learning. It represents how students develop and use strategies to think more deeply about the content (Greene & Miller, 1996; Lam et al., 2014). There are three major factors in cognitive engagement. The first factor is self-efficacy, which is the idea that people can create change by their own actions (Bandura, 1986). If students feel a strong sense of self-efficacy, they believe that their actions in the classroom will influence a change in their desired results (Greene et al., 2004). Another important aspect of cognitive engagement is student achievement goals. (Green et al., 2004; Sedaghat et al., 2011). Achievement goals predict why students are motivated to complete their tasks and what motivates them to show a mastery of something versus seeking competence because they are interested in the content (Greene & Miller, 1996; Miller et al., 1996). Students tend to perform better and have stronger processing skills when their learning goal is mastering a subject as opposed to showing their competence to others in a performance-oriented manner. When classroom tasks are meaningful and interesting to students, this impacts the extent to which they see their current learning as needed for future success (Greene et al., 2004). The third aspect is perceived instrumentality, which is the idea that tasks are meaningful for the future. If students are told that what they are learning will be beneficial and can help them in the future, it will generally make them more engaged and willing to learn the material (Greene et al., 2004; Sedaghat et al., 2011). Students with high cognitive engagement are willing to go beyond the minimum requirements and want to be challenged in their learning (Fredricks et al., 2004).

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Emotional engagement refers to how students feel about being in the classroom, their relationships with people in their school (e.g., peers and teachers) and their interest in the curriculum (Fredricks et al., 2004; Kahu, 2011). Emotional engagement differs from affective engagement in that it refers to students' emotional reactions (including their attitudes, interests, relationships, and values) to their teachers, school staff, their peers, the course content, and the class (Bryson & Hand, 2007; Kahu, 2013; Kember, Lee, & Li, 2001). Research shows students who have a high level of emotional engagement with their teachers and peers are also more likely to stay in school (Moreira, et al., 2018), to earn better grades and have higher attendance (Quin, 2017), and to be less disruptive in class (Archambault & Dupere,



2017). In contrast, when students have negative relationships with peers or negative emotional engagement with school, they are less likely to develop learning autonomy (Pedler, Yeigh, & Hudson, 2020) and more likely to drop out of school (Fredricks, et al., 2004).

STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND ACHIEVEMENT

In analyzing the student engagement literature, several themes arise. It becomes clear that building a caring school culture focused on collaborative learning as well as supportive, authentic classroom environments with strong teacher-student relationships are key to positive student engagement. Educators and school officials can employ these principles to develop strategies that are designed to promote positive student engagement. This engagement, in turn, leads to greater student achievement in their schools.

The impact of positive teacher-student relationships should not be underestimated for its relationship to students' learning (Inayat & Zehra Ali, 2020). When teachers build positive student relationships, they are laying the foundation of support that students need for engagement (Allen, et al., 2016), and when students sense that their teachers are involved and caring, they are more likely to engage (Inayat & Zehra Ali, 2020). Evidence shows that engagement serves as a mediator between student-teacher relationships and achievement (Roorda, Koomen, & Split, 2011). Classrooms best-suited to achievement are organized and well-structured (Poysa, et al., 2019) but at the same time allow space for student autonomy (Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010). Teachers can strike a balance between structure and autonomy by communicating in noncontrolling and informational ways, getting to know students and acknowledging their different perspectives, and offering clear and detailed expectations, instructions, and feedback for improvement (Jang, et al., 2010; Martin & Collie, 2019). Additionally, teachers can offer helpful guidance and scaffolding to assist students in a lesson and provide quality, actionable feedback based on competence and reflection (Jang, et al., 2010; Winstone, et al., 2017).

Individual agency has been recognized as a key factor in increased student motivation and achievement outcomes (Reeve, 2013; Reeve, Cheon, & Jang, 2020), and positive, supportive teacher feedback is one way to promote agency. Reeve and Shin (2020) suggest that to improve student agency, teachers ask students what they want, listen to what they say, and respond to student input and suggestions. The authors recommend six instructional behaviors to support this teaching style: take the students' perspective, vitalize students' psychological needs during instruction, provide explanatory rationales for teacher requests, acknowledge and accept students' expressions of negative affect, rely on invitational language, and display patience (Reeve & Shin, 2020).

Employing authentic lessons in the classroom can also help make students active agents in their own learning (Hennig Manzouli, Pineda-Baez, & Vargas, 2019). Authentic lessons should challenge students (Fung, Tan, & Chen, 2018), allow for student choice, involve hands-on activities that possibly employ technology or manipulatives (Irvine, 2020), connect to the real world, include activities that focus on analysis and synthesis, and promote student self-regulation (Hennig Manzouli, et al., 2019). Implementing a career-focused curriculum is one proven way to incorporate authenticity in the classroom. Specifically, introducing career-focused curricula in middle school can have long-term effects on engagement throughout the high school years (Orthner, et al., 2013).

Teachers are better positioned to support student agency when they have similar agency in their own learning. Agentic professional development for teachers should be designed with four key elements in mind: leadership, autonomy, intentionality, and reflectivity (Robertson, Breckenridge Padesky, & Brock, 2020). To help teachers develop classroom management practices that are conducive toward strong student engagement, professional development should also focus on strategies for building positive relationships with students, positive



behavioral support systems (Fatou & Kubiszewski, 2018), and helping teachers learn to regulate their own emotions (Reyes, et al., 2012).

Going beyond the individual classroom, schools should seek to foster a caring school culture focused on collaborative learning. Researchers cite the benefits of addressing school belonging and student engagement through a whole-school approach rather than a focused intervention on an individual group or area (Allen, et al., 2016; Fung, et al., 2018). Martin and Collie (2019) found that the cumulative effect of positive teacher-student relationships outweighed the effects of negative relationships. For schools, these findings suggest the importance of focusing on positive teacher-student relationships school-wide through staff professional development and training. Reinforcing these relationships is especially important during key transition years and in the later grades (Martin & Collie, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The preponderance of research on student engagement indicates that students' enjoyment of, effort toward, interaction with, and feelings about school can have both positive and negative impacts on their success. Recognizing and acknowledging the importance of these engagement factors may lead to making decisions that foster positive student engagement. Just as these distinct types of engagement do not operate in isolation but are intertwined, it may be important to find ways to assess and address them concurrently. Students with whom schools cultivate positive affective, behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement will be more likely to succeed in the classroom, which may translate to greater success beyond the classroom.

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