



# School effects on students' engagement with school: Academic performance moderates the effect of school support for learning on students' engagement<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the present cross-sectional study was to investigate how school support-for-learning, from peers and teachers, influences the relationship between prior academic performance and an indicator of cognitive engagement (students' future aspirations and perceptions of schoolwork). A sample of 4406 adolescent students from 68 schools in Portugal completed the self-report Student Engagement Instrument as a measure of future aspirations and perceptions of schoolwork, and perceived support for learning. We obtained students' previous year exam grades in Maths and Portuguese from school records to form a composite measure of academic performance. We used Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM) to assess whether school-level support-for-learning moderates the student-level effect of performance on engagement. Higher achieving students reported higher scores for our indicator of cognitive engagement than lower achieving students. This association was weaker in schools with high support-for-learning than those with low support-for-learning. Altogether, our results demonstrate the importance of supportive school environments in buffering the negative effect of poor performance on engagement and promoting educational equity.

## 1. Introduction

While a substantial amount of evidence demonstrates that student engagement with school, measured in a variety of ways, predicts academic performance (Borman & Overman, 2004; Carbonaro, 2005; Lee, 2014; Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2004; Willms, 2003), less attention has been given to the reciprocal relationship; academic performance also predicts student engagement (see Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, & Pagani, 2009; Chase, Hilliard, John Geldhof, Warren, & Lerner, 2014; Kindermann, 2007; Wang & Eccles, 2012; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). As students receive feedback about their performance and as work

becomes more challenging over time (Lee, Bryk, & Smith, 1993), this causal link between performance and engagement means that students with a history of poor academic performance are at risk of becoming increasingly disengaged with school and moving on deteriorating academic trajectories.

Of the many identified student background predictors of engagement such as age, gender, and socioeconomic status, academic performance is the most likely to be influenced by school policies and practices (Lee & Burkam, 2003). An identification of the school characteristics that significantly weaken the association between academic performance and student engagement is therefore critically

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important because it has the potential to help schools minimize the effect of poor performance on engagement. This is of particular importance in Portugal, the context of the present study, where the rate of secondary-school dropout (ultimate disengagement) is one of the highest in the EU - 37.1% compared to an average of 12.7% (OECD, 2012).

One school characteristic known to have a significant positive impact on student outcomes and processes is the support for learning offered by teachers and peers (Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012). The overall objective of this study was to investigate whether this school-level characteristic might serve to protect students with poor academic performance from detrimental changes in engagement.

### 1.1. Student engagement with school

Engagement with school typically refers to students' subjective experiences and perceptions concerning school (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006). These experiences and perceptions are commonly shown to be predictive of a wide range of academic trajectories and outcomes, including school dropout (Wang & Fredricks, 2014). Engagement is generally considered as a multifaceted construct with three dimensions: *Behavioral* engagement, with indicators including class attendance, absence of disruptive behavior, effort and persistence with schoolwork, and participation in extracurricular activities; *Emotional* engagement, with indicators including feelings about learning, positive attitude, interest, and intrinsic motivation (Finn, 1989; Marks, 2000); and *Cognitive* engagement, which refers collectively to students' motivations, self-concepts, future aspirations, expectancies, and perceptions and beliefs regarding school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003). Although this tri-dimensional perspective is currently the most prevalent, the number and nature of these underlying dimensions remains under debate, and this is reflected in the fact that the operationalization of student engagement is far from well established.

There is also no clear consensus about whether contextual antecedents (or facilitators) of engagement, such as support for learning, should be conceptualised as part of engagement alongside its indicators (cognitive, emotional, and behavioral). On the one hand, some researchers such as Appleton et al. (2006) have included contextual factors in their conceptualization and operationalization of engagement (see the Student Engagement Instrument, which captures indicators of cognitive engagement as well as perceived support from teachers, peers, and family). On the other hand, other authors such as Lam et al. (2014) have been explicit about the need to keep the contextual elements of engagement distinct from its indicators. Specifically, if contextual factors are included in the conceptualization of student engagement they claimed it is “not possible for researchers to study how contextual factors may affect the development of student engagement” (p. 215).

### 1.2. Link between perceptions of school support for learning and school engagement

From the perspective of interactionist frameworks (e.g. Bronfenbrenner, 2005), which describe the dynamic processes that result from the interaction between different levels of influence, school is an important developmental context that exerts a significant impact on student development. One particular theory based on such interactionist frameworks, Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2008), posits that to achieve healthy psychological development individuals need to fulfil three basic psychological needs: *relatedness* (support from others and warm interactions), *autonomy* (sense of agency and control over decisions) and *competence* (self-perceived competence and self-efficacy). Individuals tend to be motivated and actively engaged in activities and contexts that provide the conditions for the fulfilment of their psychological needs (Jang, Reeve, & Deci,

2010), and the more students perceive that their needs are being met, the more activities become intrinsically rewarding (Csikszentmihalyi, 2013; Higgins, 2006). In short, contextual factors play an important role in the fulfilment of *relatedness*, *autonomy*, and *competence*. Moreover, schools are able to directly manage many of these contextual factors and are thus, dependent on the policies and practices they adopt, responsible for providing environments that are favourable for students' needs.

One such contextual factor, the perceived support for learning available from teachers and peers, exerts a substantial influence on a range of student processes and outcomes. According to Thoits (2011), teacher and peer interactions with student functioning happen via the same processes involved in adaptive behaviour organization, including emotional support and instrumental coping. These refer to emotional sustenance (emotionally sustaining behaviours and empathy) and active coping assistance (instrumental aid, support in facing situations, and role modelling), which can be offered by two broad categories of supporters: significant others (such as teachers) and experientially similar others (peers). Teachers and peers are, thus, two important sources of two different types of support for students. Teachers play an important role in providing emotional sustenance while peers play a crucial role in providing coping assistance. In this manner, the support for learning offered by schools corresponds closely to the basic psychological needs for *relatedness* and *competence* described by Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The more students are emotionally supported and provided opportunities to feel competent, the greater the perceived support for learning experienced at school and the greater fulfilment of *competence* and *relatedness* needs. This leads to a larger positive influence of healthy social, emotional and intellectual functioning and feelings of self-worth and self-esteem on motivation and engagement (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Martin & Dowson, 2009). In support of this, there is an overall agreement within engagement literature, and across perspectives, that support for learning is of vital importance for promoting student engagement. This has been shown to be the case by cross-sectional (Lee, Dedrick, & Smith, 1991), longitudinal (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Lee & Smith, 1999; Wang & Eccles, 2013), metaanalytic (Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), and review studies (Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012).

Teachers have a fundamental interpersonal influence on child and adolescent development (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007) and represent one of the most proximal influences on the development of adolescents in school (Pianta & Hamre, 2009). Positive and supportive teacher-student interactions have been shown to be protective against negative or challenging experiences (Baker, 1999). Good relationships between teachers and students also facilitate improvements in student average achievement, especially in schools with a clear emphasis on learning (Lee & Smith, 1999). Students are less likely to drop out of school (complete disengagement) when relationships between teachers and students are consistently positive (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012). Teacher-student interactions have been shown to be positively associated with several indicators of academic trajectories including learning, academic performance, and dimensions of student engagement with school such as student academic motivation, self-efficacy, interest in class, prosocial behaviours, academic goals, social-emotional/subjective wellbeing, and mental health (Baker, Grant, & Morlock, 2008; Cornelius-White, 2007; Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001; Moreira, Dias, Vaz, & Vaz, 2013; Roorda et al., 2011). In regards to engagement, Kelly and Zhang (2016) used Hierarchical Linear Modelling (HLM) to examine the effects of teacher support on student engagement in a sample of over 25,000 students. Their analyses indicated that variance in student engagement (operationalised as interest, enjoyment, identification, and beliefs about the future utility of school subjects) was significantly associated with differences in teacher support. To complement this finding, a meta-analysis of 99 studies has shown that there is a medium to large effect size for the associations between the teacher-student relationships and engagement. There was

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