



## Engaging students: The role of teacher beliefs and interpersonal teacher behavior in fostering student engagement in vocational education

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### HIGHLIGHTS

- Teachers' beliefs and behaviors were examined in relation to student engagement.
- The context of the study was pre-vocational and vocational education.
- Perceived interpersonal teacher behavior was related to all types of engagement.
- The effect of teacher beliefs faded out when interpersonal behavior was included.
- Students' age was a negligible predictor of their engagement.

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### ABSTRACT

Student engagement is an important precursor for learning. In this study we used teacher ( $N = 200$ ) and student ( $N = 2288$ ) questionnaires to investigate whether perceived interpersonal teacher behavior and teacher beliefs concerning motives for being a teacher, attitudes toward teacher knowledge domains and self-efficacy for teaching are related to self-reported student engagement. Three components of engagement were distinguished: behavioral, emotional and cognitive engagement. The strongest relations were found between the two dimensions of interpersonal teacher behavior and the three components of student engagement. Remarkably, there was a relation of almost zero (0.01) between students' age and their engagement.

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### 1. Introduction

Student engagement is an important precursor for learning. Engagement has been shown to be related to better achievement at school, while disengagement has been shown to be related to school dropout (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Reschly & Christenson, 2006; Zimmer-Gembeck, Chipuer, Hanisch, Creed, & McGregor, 2006). In fact, disengagement is even included in the definition of the dropout process. From a pedagogical perspective, dropout is defined as the outcome of a long-term process of withdrawal and

disengagement of the student from school. This process of disengagement begins during the early school years and can ultimately lead to the student's dropping out in high school or vocational education (Bradshaw, O'Brennan, & McNeely, 2008; Dunn, Chambers, & Rabren, 2004; Finn, 1993; Rumberger, 1995). Most dropouts in the Netherlands have abandoned pre-vocational or vocational study (Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences, 2011a). It is therefore potentially of great importance to investigate how student engagement can be fostered, especially in pre-vocational and vocational education.

We know from the literature that a number of factors influence student engagement. At the school level, the size of the school and the teacher–student ratio matter (Fredricks et al., 2004). Within the classroom, a positive relationship with the teacher contributes to student engagement (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr,

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2004; Klem & Connell, 2004; Muller, 2001; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011), as do structure and clear teacher expectations. Student engagement is fostered in learning environments in which student autonomy is supported and where there is no punishment (Fredricks et al., 2004), although Elffers (2011) concluded that too much autonomy results in lower levels of student engagement. Furthermore, peers also influence the engagement of individual students (Fredricks et al., 2004). Finally, engagement usually decreases as students get older, particularly during high school (Fredricks et al., 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004).

This study focuses on the teacher. We are interested in the extent to which student engagement can be seen to be related to specific teacher behavior and beliefs. Teachers' beliefs influence their behavior in the classroom, and could affect the way they teach and the kinds of learning environments they create (Guskey, 2002; Palak & Walls, 2009). Pajares (1992) argued that there should be more focus on teacher beliefs in educational research. It may be that beliefs lie at the very heart of teaching (Kagan, 1992, p. 85). The aim of this study is therefore to explore whether and to what extent teachers' motives for being a teacher, attitudes toward teacher knowledge domains, and self-efficacy beliefs, and students' perceptions of their teacher's interpersonal behavior are related to student engagement.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This study aims to investigate teacher beliefs and interpersonal teacher behavior that could influence student engagement. Fredricks et al. (2004) stated that teacher support, positive teacher–student relationships, classroom structure, autonomy support and authentic and challenging tasks have been associated with student engagement at the classroom level. Clearly, the teacher has a role in creating those supportive conditions. However, whether teachers try to create them and how they go about trying to do so is likely to depend on their beliefs about teaching and about being a teacher.

### 2.1. The concept of engagement

According to Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008), the concept of student engagement was introduced about 29 years ago. In early work related to engagement, Tinto (1975) and Finn (1989) each developed a model explaining dropout as the consequence of student withdrawal or disengagement from school. In Tinto's (1975) mediation model for dropout in higher education, students' interactions with the academic and social system produce a certain degree of social and academic integration. Finn's (1989) participation-identification model explicitly introduced the concept of engagement, which is defined as participation in and identification with school.

Research interest in student engagement has grown over the years. Fredricks et al. (2004) reviewed the literature on engagement and proposed using engagement as a meta-construct to bring together different lines of research. However, they also concluded that there are inconsistencies in the use of the different concepts and terminology associated with the multidimensional construct of engagement. For the purposes of our study, we distinguish among three types of engagement that have been proposed by different researchers (e.g. Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Moreira, Vaz, Dias, & Petracchi, 2009; Sciarra & Seirup, 2008).

- Students are *behaviorally* engaged when they participate in the lessons, are on time, concentrate on the assignments given, and put effort into those assignments.

- Students are *emotionally* engaged when they are enthusiastic about a class, are interested in going to the class, and demonstrate a positive learning attitude.
- Students are *cognitively* engaged when they understand the importance of their education and the specific subjects and assignments, are able to formulate their own learning goals, make use of their self-regulating capabilities, and want to achieve academically.

Although we distinguish three different aspects of engagement, this does not mean that these aspects are mutually exclusive and independent of each other. For example, to be able to establish some kind of emotional engagement with school, the student needs to show at least some behavioral engagement, i.e., the student has to attend school (Archambault et al., 2009; Fredricks et al., 2004). Along with the multidimensionality of engagement, we can also distinguish two levels at which engagement can occur. A student can be engaged within a specific classroom and/or with the larger school community. Fredricks et al. (2004) state that it is important to differentiate between the two levels, because they are likely to have different antecedents and outcomes. Because our study focuses on the role of the teacher in fostering engagement, we use the concept of engagement as occurring at the classroom level.

### 2.2. Teacher–student relationships and interpersonal teacher behavior

A positive relationship between student and teacher has been shown to be important for student engagement and achievement (Roorda et al., 2011). According to Muller (2001), students who are trying to do their best are more likely to build a positive relationship with their teachers than are students who do not show interest in school. This means that the already disengaged students, those who are most in need of positive relationships with their teachers, are also less apt to be liked by their teachers (Jennings & Greenberg, 2008). Interested and caring teachers who try to establish positive relationships with their students could make the difference for students at risk (Jennings & Greenberg, 2008; Pianta & Allen, 2008).

Wubbels, Créton, and Hoymayers (1985) developed a circumplex Model for Interpersonal Teacher Behavior (MITB) that can account for teachers' interactions with their students. The MITB includes two dimensions: influence (along a continuum from low influence or Submission to high influence or Dominance) and proximity (along a continuum from low proximity or Opposition to

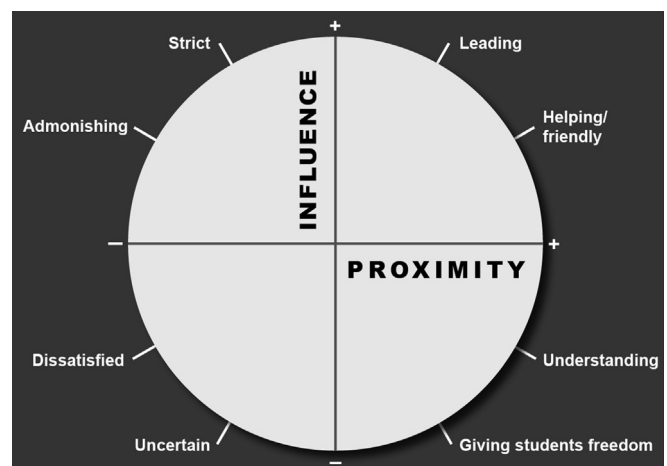


Fig. 1. Model of interpersonal teacher behavior (based on Mainhard, 2009, p. 9).

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