



Students' experiences of the development of emotional engagement



Sanna Ulmanen^{a,*}, Tiina Soini^a, Janne Pietarinen^b, Kirsi Pyhältö^{c,d}

^a School of Education, Åkerlundinkatu 5, University of Tampere, 33014 Finland

^b School of Applied Educational Science and Teacher education, University of Eastern Finland, Yliopistokatu 2, P.O. Box 111, Finland

^c Faculty of Education, University of Oulu, Yliopistokatu 9, 90014 Oulu, Finland

^d Faculty of Educational Sciences, University of Helsinki, PL, P.O. Box 2000, Finland

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ABSTRACT

The stability and internal dynamics of students' emotional engagement was examined in a longitudinal study among primary and secondary school students over three terms. A total of 170 students were surveyed, and the study was conducted using structural equation modelling. The results showed that emotional engagement remained stable over time. Furthermore, the results showed that the students' emotional engagement in teacher-student relationships associated with emotional engagement in peer relations and explained the perceived peer-group relations over time. Surprisingly, the association between teacher-student and peer-group relations was stronger among the secondary school students than among the primary school students, implying that despite the contextual differences, teachers have real opportunities to promote positive peer influences at different phases of the school path.

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1. Introduction

For a successful educational trajectory, it is crucial that students engage in schoolwork emotionally so that they feel they belong to the school community, both in teacher-student and peer relationships, and have positive affects towards school work in general (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Emotional engagement has been found to be related to positive future orientations (Crespo, Jose, Kielpikowski, & Pryor, 2013; Israelashvili, 1997) and overall development in adolescence (Debnam, Johnson, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2014). Engaging in teacher and peer relationships helps students to learn empathy and negotiation skills, and enhances their sense of self-worth and experienced well-being (Bagwell, Newcomb, & Bukowski, 1998; Wentzel, 1998). Moreover, a sense of belonging has been associated with employing effort, attention, and persistence in initiating and sustaining learning activities (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010; Li & Lerner, 2013) and displaying deep processing in learning (Dupont, Galand, Nils, & Hospel, 2014). It has also been suggested to be an ingredient in the enjoyment of learning (Ulmanen, Soini, Pietarinen, & Pyhältö, 2016). In turn, a lack of social support and (peer) rejection impairs students' school performances and increases the risk of loneliness and long-term emotional and behavioural difficulties (Gest, Graham-Bermann, & Hartup, 2001; Harel-Fisch et al., 2011; Ladd, 1999).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: Sanna.Ulmanen@uta.fi (S. Ulmanen), Tiina.Soini@uta.fi (T. Soini), Janne.Pietarinen@uef.fi (J. Pietarinen), Kirsi.Pyhalto@helsinki.fi (K. Pyhältö).

Prior research within the area has focused heavily on the relationship between emotional engagement and school achievement. However, the internal dynamics of emotional engagement, particularly in terms of social interactions within school, have been less studied. In particular, knowledge on how teacher-student relationships contribute to peer relations and how teachers can promote students' emotional engagement in peer-group relations in the school context is still scarce. Although teacher-student relationships that are characterized by warmth, empathy, and support are shown to promote peer acceptance (Gest & Rodkin, 2011; Hughes & Chen, 2011) and prosocial behaviour (Luckner & Pianta, 2011), and reduce peer rejection among middle-school students (Gazelle, 2006), as far as we are aware, there are no previous longitudinal studies exploring how the student's sense of belonging in peer and teacher-student relationships are interrelated and evolve over time.

This study focuses on exploring the development of students' emotional engagement in terms of teacher-student and peer-group relations over three academic terms. Both the stability of students' emotional engagement in teacher-student and peer relationships and the development of the interrelation over time is tested (from grades five to six and from grades seven to eight). In addition, differences between primary and secondary school students are explored.

1.1. Sense of belonging as a constituent of emotional engagement

Emotional engagement is a part of school engagement; it also consists of behavioral and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Behavioural engagement entails active participation and involvement in studying and learning, whereas cognitive engagement refers to the student's personal investment in learning activities, including self-regulation and a commitment to the mastery of learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). Furthermore, emotional engagement comprises of experiences of belonging within the school community, including experienced relationships with teachers and peers and the affective dimensions of learning and emotions towards school in general (Eccles et al., 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004). Although the emotional, behavioural, and cognitive components of academic engagement are often explored separately, they mutually influence each other over time. It has been suggested that emotional engagement plays a significant and distinct role in the ways in which students engage in academic activities as their school career progresses (Li & Lerner, 2013). In addition, behavioural engagement has received the most attention in prior studies, whereas emotional engagement has been studied less (Fredricks et al., 2004; Sagayadevan & Jeyaraj, 2012).

Prior studies on emotional engagement have focused heavily on students' emotional reactions towards the school environment (Gonida, Voulala, & Kiosseoglou, 2009) and students' valuing of schoolwork (Elffers, Oort, & Karsten, 2012; Wang, Willett, & Eccles, 2011). Emotional engagement has been typically perceived as a mediator between teacher-student relations and academic outcomes (Sagayadevan & Jeyaraj, 2012), and hence explored either as a predictor of school achievement and overall school engagement or as an outcome in itself (Sagayadevan & Jeyaraj, 2012). In addition, external factors, such as parental socio-economic status contributing to the students' valuing of schoolwork and emotional reactions towards schoolwork, have been extensively studied (Elffers et al., 2012; Gonida et al., 2009; Lee, 2012). However, the social dimensions of emotional engagement and their interrelations have been less often the focus of studies (Elffers et al., 2012; Lee, 2012; Li & Lerner, 2013; Sagayadevan & Jeyaraj, 2012).

The social ingredients of student emotional engagement consist of the student's sense of belonging in peer and student-teacher relationships, which relate the student to the particular social context of the school (Finn, 1989; Goodenow, 1993). The sense of belonging in school refers to the extent to which the student feels personally accepted, respected, and supported both by the teachers and his/her peers (Goodenow, 1993). Although a sense of belonging both in student-teacher and peer relationships is a central determinant of a student's emotional engagement, the relationships can play different functions. An extensive body of research shows that students who consider their teacher to be caring and accepting are likely to internalize the academic and prosocial goals valued by their teacher (Wentzel, 1999). This further improves their engagement in academic activities (Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2004; Lee, 2012; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Roeser, Midgley, & Urda, 1996). At the same time, close relationships with peers have been shown to support students' positive emotions towards schoolwork (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). However, study burnout (Kiuru, Aunola, Nurmi, Leskinen, & Salmela-Aro, 2008), negative behaviour, and negative school-related beliefs have been found to flourish in close relationships (Berndt, Hawkins, & Jiao, 1999; Hallinan & Williams, 1990; Sage & Kindermann, 1999). In fact, it has been found that students neglected by their peers are the most motivated to learn (Wentzel & Asher, 1995).

1.2. The influence of teachers on peer relations

There is substantial evidence that engagement in school is likely to be fostered in a caring and supportive learning environment (Battistich & Solomon, 1997; Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997). Teachers play a key role in fostering the students' sense of belonging (Roeser et al., 1996) and hence in their emotional engagement. Teachers' emotional support – including the teachers' sensitivity, interest in the students' development, ability to understand the students' perspectives, and respectful and fair treatment of students – has been found to promote students' sense of belonging in teacher-student relationships (Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Kandice, 2002; Lee, 2012; Pakarinen et al., 2010; Roeser et al., 1996). In particular, for students at risk, continuous teacher support has been found to reduce the risk of school drop-out and decrease the display of antisocial behaviour (Spilt, Hughes, Wu, & Kwok, 2012). In turn, a lack of close relationships with teachers has been shown to increase the risk of academic and behavioural problems (Anderman & Anderman, 1999).

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