Multidimensionality of behavioural engagement: Empirical support and implications

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ABSTRACT

Behavioural engagement refers to a large range of student behaviours, differing from one study to another. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using a global measure or specific behaviours? The aim of the present study was to test the multidimensionality of the construct of behavioural engagement (presence of distinct dimensions and relevance of grouping them). Five dimensions were distinguished: participation, following instructions, withdrawal, disruptive behaviour and absenteeism (explanatory factorial analyses, Sample 1). Confirmatory factorial analyses supported the grouping of these dimensions in a common construct (Sample 2). The links between correlates and a global measure of behavioural engagement or specific dimensions were generally consistent. The global measure hid differences in relations between dimensions and some correlates. Taking the multidimensionality of behavioural engagement into account appears crucial.

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1. Introduction

Behavioural engagement is crucial for students' schooling. Behaviourally engaged students reach higher achievement than disengaged students. The latter are also more at risk for school drop-out (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu & Pagani, 2009; Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012).

However, as stressed by Lawson and Lawson (2013), research on this concept is very extensive as it reflects various interests and theoretical approaches of engagement researchers. The meaning of « behaviourally (dis) engaged students » may differ largely from one study to another. According to some authors, behaviourally engaged students in the classroom context are those who take part in lessons, notably by asking questions to the teachers, by spending time on task, etc. (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999). In other studies, it consists in following teachers' instructions (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Behaviourally disengaged students are considered by some authors as those who annoy others during lessons, who do not follow the classroom rules, who act defiant, etc. (Ladd & Dinella, 2009; Ponitz, Rimm-Kaufman, Grimm & Curby, 2009). For others, these students do not participate in activities, think about other things during the lessons, avoid help-seeking, or are absent (Roeser, Strobel, Quihuis, 2002; Shih, 2008).

All these behaviours differ from each other to some degree. For instance, acting defiant, displaying disruptive behaviours, annoying others, etc. refer to « active behaviours » which would have a potential effect on the classroom climate and other students. To the opposite, withdrawal, avoiding help-seeking, thinking about other things, etc. consist in more passive

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behaviours. Moreover, they were found to be associated with different outcomes. For instance, displaying disruptive behaviours was more related to anger while withdrawal was more related to sadness (Roeser et al., 2002). These behaviours seem therefore to refer to different student experiences in school. The concept of behavioural engagement assumes that, theoretically, all these kinds of behaviours have something in common and could be considered as indicators of a same construct (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004). However, the relevance of grouping them still need to be empirically tested. Do the indicators used reflect different sides of behavioural engagement, supporting the multidimensional nature of this concept?

The answer to those questions has crucial implications for researchers as the findings of the studies may vary according to the behaviours investigated. Moreover, one could ask what are the advantages and the disadvantages of using a global measure of behavioural engagement compared with specific behaviours. The current study addresses these issues as the answer to those questions is critical to increase our understanding of the development of student engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004).

1.1. Engagement as multi-components

Engagement refers to "the quality of a student's connection or involvement with the endeavour of schooling and hence with the people, activities, goals, values, and place that compose it" (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009, p. 494). It is a multi-components concept generally assumed to include behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Wang, Willett, & Eccles, 2011). Behavioural engagement refers to the students' participation and involvement in school activities, academic, social or extracurricular (Fredricks et al., 2004). Emotional engagement consists in students' affective reactions to the school, teachers, academics and classmates (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand & Kindermann, 2008). It refers notably to discrete emotions (such as boredom, anxiety, sadness, happiness, etc.; Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) Cognitive engagement refers to the psychological commitment in learning (e.g., use of learning – such as surface and deep processing – strategies and self-regulation strategies; Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004; Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; Wang et al., 2011).

Above those distinctions, authors stressed the need to distinguish engagement from motivation (Hospel & Galand, 2011; Skinner et al., 2008). Engagement refers to the way students feel, think and behave in classroom or at school, to the level of energy or effort they put in school. Motivation, antecedent of engagement, consists in the perceptions, beliefs, and motives that fuel those reactions.

1.2. Behavioural engagement, a key construct

Common in almost all definitions and measurement of engagement (Fredricks et al., 2011), behavioural engagement is a key construct. Only this component significantly predicts drop-out when all components of engagement are considered simultaneously (Archambault et al., 2009). It is a stronger predictor of long-term achievement than emotional engagement (Ladd & Dinella, 2009) and mediates the link between academic competence and emotional engagement (Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010).

But what is meant by "behavioural engagement"? Authors define this concept as "the behaviours students engage in that involve them in the activities of the classroom and school. (. . .) (It) included the social tasks of school, for example, attending classes and school, following classroom rules, interacting positively and appropriate with teachers (. . .)" (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; p.100). In the literature, this concept has been used to refer to a large range of behaviours and has been measured through very different ways (Fredricks et al., 2011). Some authors focused on specific students' behaviours and, investigated separately: for instance, effort (Hughes, Luo, Kwok & Loyd, 2008), acting-out/disruptive behaviours (Finn, Pannozzo and Voelkl, 1995; Hughes et al., 2008; Roeser et al., 2002), inattentive behaviours (Finn et al., 1995), withdrawal (Roeser et al., 2002); participation (Buhs, Ladd & Herald, 2006; Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, & Pianta, 2014; Ladd et al., 1999), time on task (Gregory et al., 2014; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Lan et al., 2009), compliance to classroom norms (Fall and Roberts, 2012), school avoidance (Buhs et al., 2006). Other authors mixed several types of behaviour and merged them in a global measure: participation, effort, concentration, and persistence (Hughes, Wu & West, 2011; Hoglund, 2007; Smalls, 2010); attention and compliance (Wang et al., 2011); school attendance and discipline/following the rules (Archambault et al., 2009; Li & Lerner, 2011); class attendance, engagement in other activities than class work (e.g., chatting, texting; Elffers, 2013); participation and disruptive behaviours (Ladd & Dinella, 2009); involvement, persistence, avoidance, withdrawal and participation (Shih, 2008); etc. (see also e.a. Conner & Pope, 2013; Darensbourg & Blake, 2013; Li & Lerner, 2013; Virtanen, Lerkkanen, Poikkeus & Kuorelatti, 2014). As stressed by Lawson and Lawson (2013), this diversity expressed the different interests and theoretical approaches that guide research on behavioural engagement. For instance, research on self-efficacy theory or on perceived control distinguish behaviours such as active attempts, effort, persistence from passivity, giving up, etc. (see Skinner et al., 2009).

Yet, most of the time, this diversity of behaviour has not been taken into account in past research, either in measuring of behavioural engagement (as no authors included all kind of behaviours) or in discussing the results. Beyond the differences in behaviours measured, almost all authors have operationalized this construct as a single underlying continuum, from engagement to disengagement (Archambault et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2008; Ladd et al., 1999; Lanza & Taylor, 2010; Li et al., 2010). Behaviours cited above are quite different and authors have sometimes studied only some specific dimensions, but it