Making the connection: The role of social and academic school experiences in students' emotional engagement with school in post-secondary vocational education

Louise Elffers *, Frans J. Oort, Sjoerd Karsten

University of Amsterdam, Research Institute Child Development and Education, PO Box 94208, 1090 GE Amsterdam, The Netherlands

A B S T R A C T

This study examines the emotional engagement with school of a diverse sample of 909 students in post-secondary vocational education in the Netherlands. Using multilevel regression analysis, we assess the role of students' background characteristics and school experiences, and their interaction, in students' emotional engagement with school. At-risk students do not report lower levels of emotional engagement, except for students using (soft)drugs. While Dutch dropout prevention focuses on fostering a sense of belonging through enhancing teacher–student relationships, we do not find a significant role of perceived support from school staff in students' sense of belonging. A good relationship with classmates is more important to engage students in post-secondary vocational education. Perceiving an academic fit is most prominently related to the emotional engagement of vocational students, indicating that a sense of belonging should not only be defined in social, but also in academic terms.

© 2012 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Emotional engagement with school is an essential prerequisite for student effort, achievement and persistence in school (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Audas & Willms, 2001; Finn, 1993; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Janosz, Le Blanc, Boulerice, & Tremblay, 2000; Libbey, 2004; Willms, 2003). Feeling part of the school community and perceiving school as a vital and valuable constituent of their lives enhances students' participation and achievement in school, and can protect students from dropout (Finn, 1993; Finn & Voelkl, 1993). Therefore, educational researchers and practitioners seek ways to enhance students' positive emotions towards school, especially among students who are at risk for dropout. In this study, we examine the emotional engagement with school among a diverse sample of students in Dutch senior vocational education, a sector confronted with high dropout rates. We assess the role of students' background characteristics and school experiences, and the interaction between these, in their emotional connection to school.

1.1. The role of emotional engagement in school success

Students' emotions and attitudes towards school have been found to affect educational attainment in various educational settings (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001; Downey, Ainsworth, & Qian, 2009; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Fuligni, 1997; Libbey,

2004). The significant role of school emotions in educational attainment is generally explained by their impact on achievement-related behaviors and performance (Eccles, 1983; Finn, 1989, 1993; Wigfield, Tonks, & Lutz Klauda, 2009). In the school motivation literature, the interplay between students' emotions, behavior and performance has been studied mainly from a micro-level perspective, focusing on the domain-specific beliefs, goals, and values that students attach to specific tasks or classroom contexts (Ahmed, Minnaert, van der Werf, & Kuyper, 2010; Eccles, 1983; Robbins, Lauver, Le, Davis, & Langley, 2004; Wigfield et al., 2009). The school persistence literature tends to take a more general perspective by focusing on students' emotions towards their school as a whole (Janosz et al., 2000; Tinto, 1993). The interplay between those more general school emotions and students' behavior and performance in school is a central notion in school engagement theory as well (Audas & Willms, 2001; Finn, 1993; Fredricks et al., 2004; Willms, 2003). School engagement is usually conceptualized by two dimensions: *emotional engagement*, reflecting students' identification with school, and *behavioral engagement*, pertaining to students' participation in school (Finn, 1989, 1993). Finn's renowned participation–identification model (Finn, 1989) emphasizes the importance of emotional engagement with school for positive school behavior and performance. If students identify with their school, they participate more actively in school activities. This participation reinforces academic achievement, which in turn stimulates identification. If students do not identify with school, they are more likely to engage in problem behavior or to physically withdraw from school, leading to negative achievement outcomes, and to further emotional and physical withdrawal. Thus, students can be involved in a self-reinforcing cycle of positive

* Corresponding author. Tel.: + 31 20 5251338.
  E-mail address: l.elffers@uva.nl (L. Elffers).

engagement and achievement in school. Likewise, they can be captured in a negative process of declining engagement and performance in school, which eventually culminates in dropout (Finn, 1989; Fredricks et al., 2004).

1.2. Defining emotional engagement

In this study, we focus on the emotional dimension of school engagement, which can be defined in more and less contextualized ways. The less context-specific type of emotional engagement relates to students' *general attitudes towards education* and their overall identification with their role as a student (Anderman & Freeman, 2004). The more context-specific type of emotional engagement relates to students' identification with a particular school context (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Anderman & Kaplan, 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004). This identification can refer to the school as a social context, comprising all social actors that constitute the school community, which is defined as a *sense of belonging* in school (Finn, 1989; Fredricks et al., 2004). It can also refer to the school as an academic context, reflecting students' perceptions of the usefulness of their education for their career goals and potential. This is defined as students' *valuing* of their particular education (Finn, 1989; Fredricks et al., 2004). In our study, we take into account all three dimensions of emotional engagement with school: students' *sense of belonging, valuing* and *general educational attitudes.*

1.3. School experiences affecting students' emotional engagement

As emotional engagement with school is a crucial attribute to school success, it is important to know which aspects of the school context promote or undermine engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). We need to identify the "black box" processes through which bonding occurs (Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Engagement results from the interaction of individual students with the school context (Fredricks et al., 2004). Students' differ in their perceptions of the institutional environment, and it is their perceived fit or mismatch with various aspects of that environment which most directly determines whether they identify with school or not (Eccles, 1983; Jang, Reeve, & Deci, 2010; Roeser, Urdan, & Stephens, 2009; Tinto, 1993). Therefore, we need to find out to what extent emotions towards school are affected by students' perceptions of various aspects of the school context: with the academic program, the teachers, the classmates, and the school climate (Fredricks et al., 2004; Tinto, 1993; Wehlage et al., 1989). Both social and academic interactions between students and the various actors in the educational environment play a role in students' emotional engagement (Anderman, 2003; Tinto, 1993), and social and academic interactions are often intertwined in educational contexts (Karp, Hughes, & O'Gara, 2010). Some studies emphasize the importance of the academic dimension for students' emotional engagement, for instance the perceived quality or relevance of the curriculum (Hausmann, Schofield, & Woods, 2007; Newmann, 1992; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella, Duby, & Iverson, 1983). Others stress the role of social interactions with classmates and school staff (e.g. Wentzel, 1998). In particular, supportive teacher–student relationships are a prominent factor in the student engagement literature (Anderman, 2003; Klem & Connell, 2007; Nichols, 2008; Tinto, 1993). Supportive teacher–student relationships may be especially important for the engagement of at-risk students who lack supportive ties outside school (Scientific Council for Government Policy, 2008; Wehlage et al., 1989). However, it is not always clear whether the caring relationship with teachers as experienced by students should be attributed to teachers' pedagogical caring about students' learning processes, or to the interpersonal or social–emotional aspects of caring (Freeman et al., 2007; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). While the cited studies differ in the relative

emphasis placed on the social or academic sources of engagement, most studies stress that both positive social and academic school experiences are needed to promote school engagement (Freeman et al., 2007; Tinto, 1993).

1.4. Individual differences in emotional engagement

Educational outcomes are often socially and ethnically patterned (Alexander et al., 2001; Dutch Ministry of Education Culture & Science, 2009). As school emotions affect educational attainment, it is relevant to examine to what extent differences in students' emotional engagement with school mirror differences in the educational outcomes across various sociodemographic groups. A number of studies identified differentiating effects of individual characteristics that are associated with an increased risk for dropout on student engagement. Some studies report that students from lower socioeconomic or ethnic minority backgrounds, or students with lower educated parents, experience a weaker sense of belonging in school (Alexander et al., 2001; Marks, 2000; OECD, 2006; Voelkl, 1995). Other studies indicate that girls tend to be more emotionally engaged in school than boys, who drop out more often (Anderman & Freeman, 2004; Marks, 2000). While the support for school that students encounter in their communities from significant others, such as parents and peers, promote school engagement (Finn, 1993; Marks, 2000; Ryan, 2000), students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds often lack access to sufficient supportive resources in their home environment (Roderick, 1993). In contrast, a relative absence of personal background effects on students' emotional engagement has been noticed as well (Hausmann et al., 2007; Marks, 2000).

1.5. Emotional engagement in Dutch senior vocational education

Most research on student engagement is based on data from predominantly White middle-class samples from middle and (junior) high schools (Fredricks et al., 2004; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Zimmer-Gembeck, Chipuer, Hanisch, Creed, & McGregor, 2006). By examining the emotional engagement of a diverse group of first year students in Dutch senior vocational education (SVE), this study expands the focus to a more diverse population, and to a relevant but thus far understudied educational setting. As the senior continuation of the vocational track in Dutch secondary education, SVE provides one to four year specialized, job-oriented vocational programs to students aged 16+. Dropout rates peak in the first year of SVE, accounting for 75% of school dropout in the Netherlands (CBS Statistics Netherlands, 2010; Dutch Ministry of Education Culture & Science, 2011; The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2008). The transition from a smaller, familiar school environment in pre-vocational secondary education to the larger SVE institutions appears difficult for many students. New classmates, more social and academic autonomy and responsibility, and less personal contact are often mentioned as potential hurdles for SVE freshmen. SVE schools serve a substantial proportion of students who can be labeled 'at-risk' based on personal background characteristics such as a low socioeconomic status, an ethnic minority background, having lower educated or unemployed parents, or coming from a poor or broken family (Dutch Ministry of Education Culture & Science, 2009; Kuhry, 1998; Scientific Council for Government Policy, 2008). Also, many students in SVE are confronted with an accumulation of difficult circumstances in their lives that may impede their school careers, for instance drug abuse, financial problems, delinquency, or pregnancy (Scientific Council for Government Policy, 2008). A recent national policy report on dropout prevention (Scientific Council for Government Policy, 2008) highlights the importance of an emotional connection to school for the school success of at-risk students in vocational education. It is argued that this emotional connection could be enhanced by creating practice-based learning environments, by reinforcing a school