



# School context, achievement motivation, and academic engagement: A longitudinal study of school engagement using a multidimensional perspective



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## ABSTRACT

This longitudinal study adopts a multidimensional perspective to examine the relationships between middle school students' perceptions of the school environment (structure support, provision of choice, teaching for relevance, teacher and peer emotional support), achievement motivation (academic self-concept and subjective task value), and school engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement). Participants were from an ethnically diverse, urban sample of 1157 adolescents. The findings indicated that student perceptions of distinct aspects of the school environment contributed differentially to the three types of school engagement. In addition, these associations were fully or partially mediated by achievement motivation. Specifically, student perceptions of the school environment influenced their achievement motivation and in turn influenced all three types of school engagement, although in different ways. Moderation effects of gender, ethnicity, and academic ability were also discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

*Active engagement* in school is critical to student educational success (Finn & Rock, 1997; Wang & Holcombe, 2010). Youth must be actively engaged with their school education in order to acquire the knowledge and skills required for a successful transition into postsecondary programs and careers (Wang & Eccles, 2012a, 2012b). School engagement is also a malleable state that can be shaped by school context, therefore holding tremendous potential as a locus for interventions (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Jimmerson, Campos, & Grief, 2003). Currently, and particularly at the secondary level, increasing student engagement is an explicit goal of many school reform efforts aimed at addressing problems of student boredom and alienation, low achievement, and high dropout rate (Marks, 2000).

In order to promote school engagement, we must first better understand the school factors that influence student engagement. Self-determination theorists suggest that individuals seek experiences that fulfill their fundamental needs and identities through their interaction with the environment. According to this view,

student engagement in school is influenced by the degree to which they perceive that the school context meets their psychological needs (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Krapp, 2005). Stage-environment fit and expectancy-value theorists (Eccles et al., 1993; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 1998) further argue that the failure of schools to meet the psychological needs of adolescents often leads to declines in academic motivation and interest, which in turn contributes to decreased school engagement and poor academic performance as adolescents transition to middle school. Most of the extant research, however, has failed to capture the dynamic and interactive nature of engagement. Specifically, few empirical studies have focused on how school characteristics interact with and influence various forms of school engagement simultaneously. Moreover, research has not yet fully explained the actual process that accounts for the effect of the school environment on student engagement. It is unclear whether various aspects of the school environment influence the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement differentially and whether the associations between the school environment and engagement are mediated by more fundamental motivational beliefs within the student. Therefore, there is a critical need for research that takes an integrative motivational approach to investigate the contextual and psychological factors that predict school engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Such research could contribute to the knowledge

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base that informs effective school practices and to the efforts of researchers and educators who do the important work of identifying the optimal developmental correlates of school engagement.

In this study we adopt a multidimensional perspective, using a large-scale sample of ethnically diverse students to investigate the longitudinal associations among school environment, achievement motivation, and school engagement during the middle school years. In particular, we expand on previous research by examining whether school environment influences student engagement in school both directly and indirectly through achievement motivation and whether these associations differ by student gender, ethnicity, and academic ability. The study of school engagement as a multidimensional construct, and as an interaction between the individual and the school environment, will aid in identifying the particular school characteristics that foster student engagement and increase our understanding of the mechanisms through which they operate.

### 1.1. Theoretical frameworks for school engagement

*Self-determination theory* and *stage-environment fit theory* posit that engagement is manifested in the quality of students' interactions with learning activities and academic tasks (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Eccles, 2004; Skinner & Wellborn, 1994). Engagement is thus conceptualized as consisting of multiple distinguishable features, including behavior, emotion, and cognition (Fredricks et al., 2004; Jimmerson et al., 2003). *Behavioral engagement* refers to the actions and practices that students direct toward school and learning, including positive conduct and absence of disruptive behavior, as well as involvement in learning and academic tasks (Connell, 1990; Finn, 1989). *Emotional engagement* represents a student's positive affective reactions to, interest in, and valuing of school activities (Voelkl, 1997). *Cognitive engagement* refers to students' cognitive investment in learning, including mental efforts directed toward learning, use of self-regulated strategies to learn and master concepts, and willingness to exert necessary efforts for comprehension of complex ideas (Corno & Mansinach, 1983; Zimmerman, 1990). These three components of school engagement are dynamically embedded within the individual and provide a rich characterization of how students act, feel, and think (Wang & Peck, 2013).

School engagement is optimized when students perceive that the school context fulfills their needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Competence refers to the need to experience oneself as effective in one's interactions with the social environment (Elliot & Dweck, 2005), and a student's need for competence is fulfilled when they know how to effectively achieve desired outcomes (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Autonomy refers to the extent to which an

individual experiences oneself as the source of action. Autonomy is supported when a student perceives schoolwork as relevant to his or her interests and goals or when a student experiences choice in determining his or her own behavior (Assor, Kaplan, & Roth, 2002). Finally, relatedness refers to the need to experience oneself as connected to other people (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). Fulfillment of the need for relatedness is likely to occur when teachers and peers create a caring and supportive environment.

*Expectancy-value theory* provides a theoretical foundation for a mediational model that links school characteristics to school engagement and performance through student motivational beliefs (i.e., academic self-concept and subjective task values). According to expectancy-value theory, achievement-related choices such as school engagement are influenced psychologically by the individual's expectation for success and subjective valuing of the academic work (see Eccles, 2007); students most likely to engage in school learning place higher value and have greater confidence in their academic abilities than those who do not. Expectancy-value theory also links individual differences in motivational beliefs to the experiences that individuals have in school contexts. Teachers create opportunities for students to engage in a variety of school activities (Eccles et al., 1993; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002), and these experiences provide students with information regarding their competency to succeed, their relatedness to others in that setting, and their autonomy as learners—allowing them to realize their personal and social identities (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). This information cumulates to influence the development of self-concepts of one's ability and subjective task values for the types of activities to which the student is exposed. These motivational beliefs, in turn, influence student engagement in various educational activities (Simpkins, Davis-Kean, & Eccles, 2006). Drawing on these theoretical frameworks, school engagement results from an interaction of the individual with his/her context and is responsive to both variations in factors of the school environment and motivational characteristics (see Fig. 1).

### 1.2. The link between perception of school environment and school engagement

Research suggests that the fit between adolescents' psychological needs and their school environment influences both motivation and school engagement (Alonso-Tapia & Pardo, 2006; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008; Wigfield, Eccles, Davis-Kean, Roeser, & Scheifele, 2006). *Self-determination* theorists and *stage-environment fit* theorists argue that 'fit' is optimized when the school context provides adequate support for the development and maintenance of a student's sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Eccles et al., 1993; Wigfield et al.,

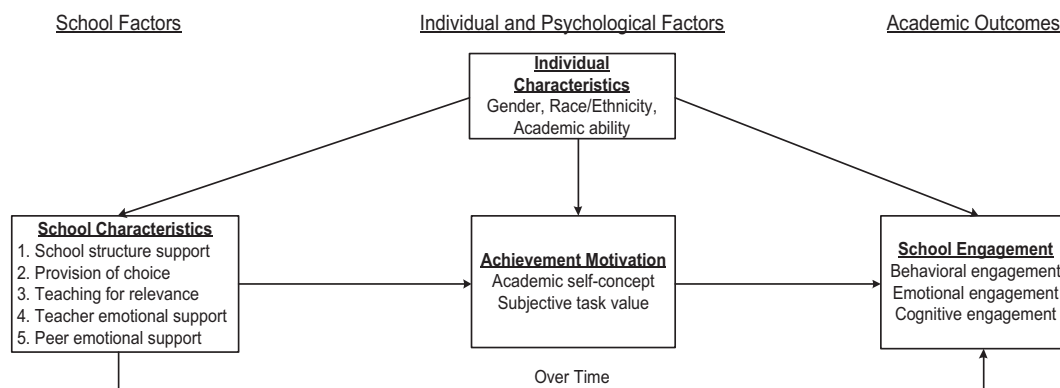


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

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