



Secondary teachers' conceptions of student engagement: Engagement in learning or in schooling?

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ABSTRACT

Teacher actions can influence how students engage at school, making it relevant to understand their conceptions of student engagement and how to facilitate it. Reviews of existing literature suggested that a distinction between engagement in schooling and engagement in learning might help differentiate between social and academic outcomes.

Data from a phenomenographic study of 20 Australian teachers were analysed to show how teacher thinking related to this distinction. While some teachers held complex conceptions centred on promoting cognitive engagement and student learning, others aligned with engagement in schooling, focusing on generating participation and emphasising positive student affective experiences.

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1. Introduction

Internationally, the meta-construct *student engagement* is widely discussed in academic research and educational policy. Supranational groups like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have commissioned multiple reports on student engagement (e.g., Kirsch et al., 2002; OECD, 2006; Willms, 2003). Willms' (2003) report examined student engagement in both member and non-member countries ($n = 42$), identifying that within OECD member countries, 25% of students had a low sense of belonging at school, with 20% regularly absent from school; non-member countries reported even higher rates of disengagement. While there has been considerable research on student engagement in the tertiary sector (e.g., Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; McInnis, 2001), this paper focuses on understandings within a compulsory schooling context. Within this sector, engagement is considered correlated with:

- Improved academic achievement (Finn & Rock, 1997; Marks, 2000)
- Higher school completion rates (Finn, 1989)
- Increased student sense of belonging in schools and other social institutions. (Willms, 2003)

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However, as Maslak, Kim, and McLoughlin (2010) note, “the vast majority of theoretical frameworks and research on the topic of educational engagement are couched within the Western world” (p. 256). Western (and primarily Anglophone) perspectives often dominate discourses relating to student engagement, even when these discussions occur in languages other than English (e.g., Negrini, 2010; Ros, 2009).

While student engagement is considered important globally, the consequences of disengagement are not uniform. An, Hannum, and Sargent's (2007) research into student engagement in rural China pointed out that here a student's level of engagement in primary school was likely to influence parents' willingness to take up the financial burden required for them to attend further schooling. Hence, for many students in the developing world, their engagement may directly affect their chances of accessing education.

Internationally, engagement is considered malleable (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Blumenfeld et al., 2005; Finn & Rock, 1997; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Marks, 2000), promoting hope that increasing engagement may improve outcomes for at-risk student populations wherever they live (Lamborn, Brown, Mounts, & Steinberg, 1992; Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007). Across cultures and countries there appear to be engagement gaps, with students from lower socio-economic levels and minority groups generally demonstrating the lower levels of school engagement (e.g., Maslak et al., 2010; Willms, 2003). However, as Vibert and Shields (2003) note, correlations do not imply causality, with the relationship between engagement

and positive social and academic outcomes more complex than simple cause and effect. Willms (2003) points out that family background only partially explains engagement levels, suggesting that school policies and procedures do have an effect as well.

While improving student engagement is seen as a potential way to remediate social inequality and better educational outcomes for all students, work to accomplish this goal is currently hampered by the fact that at present student engagement is a 'messy' construct, conceptualised in diverse ways (e.g., Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; McFadden & Munns, 2002). In this paper, research literature about student engagement in compulsory schooling and data from a qualitative study of teacher conceptions of engagement are used to argue that a distinction between engagement in schooling and engagement in learning would help educators make clear what they hope is achieved through student engagement.

2. Academic understandings of student engagement

Within academic literature, student engagement is often presented as a meta-construct with two to four dimensions (Sharkey, Sukkyung, & Schnobelen, 2008). Constructs frequently draw on behavioural, academic, psychological, and cognitive dimensions of engagement, each of which is described in turn.

Much research focuses almost exclusively on behavioural engagement (Zyngier, 2008), typically used to measure student involvement in school. It is often quantified by examining pupils' attendance, compliance with school rules, and participation in classroom and extracurricular activities. Some have divided behavioural engagement into two dimensions: behavioural engagement and academic engagement (e.g., Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, & Lehr, 2004; Appleton et al., 2008; Furlong & Christenson, 2008). Within these conceptualisations, behavioural engagement includes student attendance, active participation in classes, and/or involvement in extracurricular activities, while academic engagement was evidenced by time spent doing schoolwork in school or at home, academic credits accrued, and homework completed.

The final two dimensions, psychological and cognitive engagement, are more abstract and difficult to quantify, which is perhaps why they are examined less frequently in research. Some prefer to use the less theoretically laden term emotional engagement (e.g., Blumenfeld et al., 2005; Fredricks et al., 2004) instead of psychological engagement (e.g., Anderson et al., 2004; Appleton et al., 2008; Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007; Harris, 2008; Marks, 2000) to describe affective factors like interest, enjoyment, support, belonging, and attitudes towards school, learning, teachers, and peers. Cognitive engagement relates to students' personal investment in learning (Ainley, 1993; Lee & Anderson, 1993; Meece, Blumenfeld, & Hoyle, 1988), including goal-setting, intrinsic motivation, self-regulation, commitment to mastery learning, and use of learning strategies.

Debate exists over whether all dimensions of engagement should be investigated simultaneously as each relates to a unique aspect of student experience (e.g., Blumenfeld et al., 2005; Fredricks et al., 2004) or if some are more worthy of investigation than others in relation to specific outcomes (e.g., Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991). Glanville and Wildhagen (2007, p. 1020) argue that while one dimension might help prevent early school leaving, another may lead to improved achievement scores. Their perspective appears plausible in relation to commonly cited goals for student engagement: positive social outcomes and student learning. In this paper, the term 'student learning' is used to refer to curricular or intended learning as opposed to other things students may inadvertently 'learn' by participating in an activity or being physically present in a classroom. It is assumed that the curricular or intended learning should allow students to adopt

a deep approach to learning (Marton & Booth, 1997), although it is acknowledged that this may not always occur due to range of curricular, teacher, and student related reasons.

Regardless of student academic performance, pupils' integration within a school community is described as a positive social outcome. For example Willms (2003) notes in the OECD report on student engagement:

This report considers sense of belonging and participation as important schooling outcomes in their own right. Engagement is seen as a disposition towards learning, working with others, and functioning in a social institution, which is expressed in students' feelings that they belong at school, and in their participation in school activities. (p. 8)

Constructs associated with behavioural and psychological engagement (e.g., school attendance, participation, and completion; positive pupil behaviour; and student enjoyment of and identification with school) are seen as leading to these positive social outcomes.

However, cognitive engagement appears to have the strongest relationship with improvements in student learning (Ainley, 1993; Miller, Greene, Montalvo, Ravindran, & Nichols, 1996). For example, Ainley's (1993) work identified that cognitively engaged students used deep level learning strategies far more frequently than their disengaged counterparts. Nystrand and Gamoran's (1991) substantive engagement construct (mental involvement with the issues of academic study, authentic interactions with teachers/peers, etc.) was found to have a strong, positive effect on achievement.

This review identifies that there are multiple 'types' of engagement (i.e., behavioural, academic, psychological, and cognitive engagement) and puts forward that these do not necessarily lead to the same outcomes. While behavioural, academic, and psychological engagement appear related to positive social outcomes, it is questionable if they lead to increased learning for all students as engagement/achievement paradoxes have been found (e.g., Shernoff & Schmidt, 2006, 2008). This suggests that a distinction between these two major purposes of engagement would be useful to differentiate *engagement in schooling* (defined as students displaying behavioural, academic, and psychological aspects of engagement, e.g., participation, enjoyment, attachment with school) and *engagement in learning* (defined as students who are cognitively engaged, e.g., acting as self-regulated learners, intrinsically motivated, committed to mastery learning using deep learning strategies). While the idea that different types of engagement may lead to different outcomes is not new (e.g., Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Zyngier, 2007), this paper shows how the distinction between engagement in schooling and learning can be applied both to research literature and to empirical data from teacher perspectives.

3. Teacher understandings of student engagement

While there has been a significant body of research on student engagement, few researchers have examined how teachers understand this concept and what outcomes they expect from student engagement. Teachers' understandings are important as their actions have been shown to influence student engagement (e.g., Brewster & Bowen, 2004; Cothran & Ennis, 2000; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Marks, 2000; Sharkey et al., 2008; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). For example, in Brewster and Bowen's (2004) survey of 699 American Latino middle and high school students using the School Success Profile (SSP), regression analyses indicated that social support from teachers was an important factor in school engagement, even after controlling for parent support and demographics (i.e., single parent, poverty, gender, level of school).

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