The role of parent, classmate, and teacher support in student engagement: Evidence from Ghana

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A B S T R A C T

The literature is unequivocal about the importance of improving academic engagement in addressing challenges such as school drop out or increasing student motivation. What is less certain, particularly in the literature from developing countries, is how social support systems (parents, teachers, and classmates) influence students' emotional and behavioral engagement. Drawing from the ecological perspective, this study analyzes data from Ghana using structural equation modeling to examine mediated and unmediated pathways through which parent, teacher, and classmate support affect students' emotional and behavioral engagement. Findings suggest classmate support has the strongest association with student engagement, followed by parental support. Teacher support is neither a mediator nor a direct predictor of student engagement. These findings have implications for teacher training and professional development, especially training on how to actively involve parents in motivating their children to be engaged scholars.

Many scholars have focused on improving students' academic engagement as a critical pathway toward educational success as well as improving the quality of education (Coates, 2010; Christenson et al., 2012). Efforts to increase student engagement can be traced back to the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s, when the National Survey of Student Engagement was instituted in the United States, and later modified for other Western contexts (Trowler and Trowler, 2010). Since those early efforts, the field has made significant empirical strides to identify the protective role of student engagement when addressing challenges such as school drop out and risky behaviors (Archambault et al., 2009; Wang and Fredricks, 2014). The body of research on engagement has abundantly highlighted the role student engagement plays in facilitating student motivation, content retention, school adjustment, academic achievement, and behavior within school environments (Andrews and Duncan, 1997; Barber and Olsen, 2003; Guo et al., 2014; Li and Lerner, 2011; McCoy et al., 2013; Wang and Peck, 2013; Aunola et al., 2000).

Despite the vast literature on student engagement, existing gaps in this literature has hampered the translation of research evidence into practice in resource-limited countries, especially sub-Saharan Africa. First, although research on education in sub-Saharan Africa has advanced on some indicators (e.g., school enrollment, attendance, and academic performance), research focused on student academic

engagement has received limited attention; thus, little is known about the full nature of student engagement. Neither does the field have a good sense of how best to track student engagement in resource-limited contexts. Moreover, although clarity of the conceptualization, dimensionality, and psychometric properties of the engagement construct is considered "a prerequisite to advance the emerging construct of student engagement and its usefulness in interventions and school programs" (Christenson et al., 2012, p. vii), research has not addressed the lack of clarity of the student engagement construct in resource-limited contexts. This study aimed to help fill this gap by using data from junior high school students in Ghana to test and validate the factor structure of the student engagement construct.

In school intervention research, engagement is an important malleable factor, as Christenson et al. (2012) noted: "Engagement is an alterable state of being that is highly influenced by the capacity of school, family, and peers to provide consistent expectations and supports for learning" (pp. v–vi). In their study of student-teacher relationship in the United States, Woolley et al. (2009) found that teacher support mediated the effect of classmate and parental support on student behavior. In addition, the U.S.-based High School Study of Student Engagement, conducted with more than 40,000 students in 103 high schools across 27 different states, reported that students identified teacher support as critical to student engagement (Yazzie-Mintz and

McCormick, 2012). However, the pathways through which social contexts (i.e., parent, classmate, and teacher support) affect different dimensions of student engagement remains unclear in the student engagement scholarship from sub-Saharan Africa because existing studies have not adequately explored these relationships.

An important question for education stakeholders in developing countries is, "How do these mediated relationships among support systems and student engagement reflect the contextual nuances in non-Western setting?" Because most of the research has been U.S.-based, it is unclear whether the hypothesized mediated pathway holds in resource-limited settings given the differences in educational infrastructure and resources such as classroom technology, human resource capacity, and household economic conditions. For example, in resource-limited settings such as Ghana, stakeholders have substantial concerns that student-teacher engagement is hampered because of the lack of proper teacher training on how to engage students (Ampiah and Adu-Yeboah, 2009). Due to poor training, teachers rely on the "banking model" of education where students are expected to exercise rote memorization without questioning the source of the information (Freire, 2005). In addition, it is unclear if teacher support has similar effects in the sub-Saharan African context as it does in Western contexts (Woolley et al., 2009), and if so, the extent to which teacher support mediates the effects of classmate and parent support on student engagement. This study sought to address these unanswered questions about the potential pathways by which classmate, parent, and teacher support affect various dimensions of student engagement.

1. Student engagement

Although student engagement scholars have unanimously supported the multidimensional nature of that construct, no consensus exists on the number of subconstructs. In the majority of studies, the student engagement construct has between two and four subconstructs (i.e., emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and academic). The present study focused on the subconstructs of emotional and behavioral engagement as described by Fredricks et al. (2004). These two subtypes of student engagement have been the most studied and are considered as benchmarks for evaluating the success of the other forms of engagement (Reschly and Christenson, 2012). In this study, student engagement is defined as students' emotional and behavioral response to schooling activities and participation in learning activities (Fredricks et al., 2004).

In the school environment, emotional engagement taps into students' feelings about their school activities and the extent to which they value academic work. Emotional engagement is usually internal, and thus difficult to observe; a student's emotional engagement can manifest in the form of fears and anxieties or in the form of enthusiasm about schoolwork and interactions with teachers, peers, and the school (Reschly and Christenson, 2012). However, given both the predominant social norm of adult control and expected show of obedience and respect for adults within some Ghanaian families (Twum-Danso, 2010), teachers and parents might be unable to observe some students' emotional engagement. In contrast, classmates might be able to observe fellow students' emotional engagement because they provide emotional bonds that allow each other to freely share their successes, fears, and worries about school (Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012).

Behavioral engagement refers to students' learning and participation in academic tasks. Such participation can manifest in the classroom through students' behaviors such as asking and answering questions, concentration and attentiveness during class, and persistence of learning efforts (Skinner et al., 2008). Unlike emotional engagement, the manifestation of behavioral engagement is often external and observable. Other researchers have extended the conceptualization of behavioral engagement to include students' school-attendance habits and participation in school-based extracurricular activities (Appleton et al., 2008; Blumenfeld et al., 2005; Christenson et al., 2012). Within the Ghanaian setting, children are socialized to respect and never

question the authority or knowledge of parents, teachers, and adults in society (Twum-Danso, 2010). Questioning authority or disobeying an adult's instructions can lead to punishment; thus, this social norm and its associated fear of punishment serve as barriers that prevent children from fully participating or emotionally engaging in discourse involving adults. Without the element of emotional engagement, students in such contexts are unlikely to exhibit the desired behavioral engagement.

Traditionally, as suggested by the large body of scholarship on engagement, emotion researchers have assumed emotional engagement shapes behavioral engagement. This relationship was explained by Pekrun and Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012) who noted, "specific emotions function to trigger and facilitate impulses for specific action and thus play a role in initiating behaviors" (p. 256). However, the literature is not equally clear on the relationship between emotional and behavioral engagement because many mixed findings have been reported. In some studies, the relationship was inverse because positive emotional engagement led to behavioral disengagement (Carver et al., 1996). In contrast, several scholars have noted times when negative emotions energized students to increase their behavioral engagement (Linnenbrink, 2007; Turner and Schallert, 2001; Pekrun et al., 2002). The current study adds to the literature by examining the influence of emotional engagement on behavioral engagement. Consistent with prior studies, we hypothesize a direct effect of emotional engagement on behavioral engagement.

2. Social support

Support from parents, peers, and teachers have emerged as critical determinants of student engagement, and these types of support have been specifically linked to improvement in mathematics (Azmitia et al., 2009), reading performance (Park and Bonner, 2008), appreciation of the school environment (Brewster and Bowen, 2004), and self-reported student sense of belonging (Adelabu, 2007). This study adopted Barnes and Duck's (1994, p. 176) definition of social support as "behaviors that, whether directly or indirectly, communicate to an individual that she or he is valued and cared for by others."

Several typologies of social support exist, but this study focused on five typologies (see Table 1) applicable to the Ghanaian context: informational, such as appraisal of progress; network, such as companionship from peers; emotional, such as warmth and kindness from peers and teachers; esteem, such as motivational messages from parents; and tangible support, such as parental assistance with child's homework (Ko et al., 2013). Notwithstanding the broad scope of these typologies, each type of social support can be classified as a formal or informal support system (Torsheim et al., 2012), depending on the interaction of the type of social environment and the actors who provide support.

For example, in the school setting, teachers have the ability to offer both informal and formal support. However, in developing countries in Africa, Asia, Central and South America, and the Middle East where cultures often foster a power distance between students and teachers, the teachers' default is more likely to be formal social support (Joy and Kolb, 2009; Whitehead, 2007; Woodward and Denton, 2013). Parental support is expected to be informal because parent–child interactions occur most frequently in the home environment. However, parents also offer formal support in their interactions with their children's teachers. For instance, parents might check in with classroom teachers about their children's progress and invest in helping their children succeed in school (Glozah and Pevalin, 2014).

Classmates offer informal support and they are expected to naturally interact with their peers in many informal ways, particularly when they interact outside of the school setting. Lynch and Cicchetti (1997) argued that "as children develop, their relationships with others continue to affect their ability to be actively engaged in school" (p. 83); thus, informal peer support is a key factor in engagement, but it is unclear if or to what extent peer support can be shaped. Given these