



Am I in the right place? Academic engagement and study success during the first years at university



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 November 2015

Received in revised form 14 July 2016

Accepted 11 August 2016

Keywords:

Academic engagement
Self-regulated learning
Academic achievement
University students
Latent profile analysis

ABSTRACT

Entrance to university does not automatically lead to high academic engagement and success, and there may be individual differences in student engagement. In the present study, university students' ($N = 668$) academic engagement and disengagement profiles, and the differences between them in terms of academic achievement, were investigated. Students from introductory courses were classified by Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) into homogenous groups having similar patterns according to the following variables: study engagement, study-related exhaustion, lack of interest, lack of self-regulation, and uncertainty of one's career choice. Four groups of students were identified: *engaged*, *disengaged*, *undecided*, and *alienated*. Engaged students received the highest grades, with disengaged and undecided students performing most poorly. In addition, the profiles were related to the behavioral indicators of engagement (i.e., ECTS credits). Even after two years of studying, engaged students were performing better than disengaged students. The study's implications for both research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Entering university is a big step for students. A wide variety of dispositions, conceptions, motivational tendencies, and prior knowledge color the way individual students see their new learning environment. The academic environment, in turn, play an important role in how university students experience their studying, and in how they develop intellectually (e.g., Entwistle & Peterson, 2004; Lonka & Lindblom-Ylänne, 1996; Trigwell & Prosser, 1991; Vanderstoep, Pintrich, & Fagerlin, 1996; Vermetten, Vermunt, & Lodewijks, 1999; Vermunt, Richardson, Donche, & Gijbels, 2013). The literature has consistently shown that the first years are the most critical in shaping persistence decisions and in influencing student attitudes (e.g., Astin, 1993; Blythman & Orr, 2003; Johnson, 1994; McInnis, James, & McNaught, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1996).

When the academic context has a good fit with students' interests, expectations, and study practices, the end result should be high engagement, adaptive motivation, and greater well-being (Gilbreath, Kim, &

Nichols, 2011; Schmitt, Oswald, Friede, Imus, & Merritt, 2008; Upadaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Students whose majors are congruent with their skills and interests are the most likely to persist and succeed (Allen & Robbins, 2008; Porter & Umbach, 2006; Tracey & Robbins, 2006). However, even well-motivated and highly selected students may face problems in regulating their learning (Donche, Coertjens, & van Petegem, 2010; Donche & van Petegem, 2009; Heikkilä, Lonka, Nieminen, & Niemivirta, 2012; Heikkilä, Niemivirta, Nieminen, & Lonka, 2011; Nieminen, Lindblom-Ylänne, & Lonka, 2004). Problems in self-regulation may further increase the risk of exhaustion (Litmanen, Loyens, Sjöblom, & Lonka, 2014; Misra, McKean, West, & Russo, 2000).

The aim of the present study was to look at academic engagement and the problems students may face during the decisive first years at university. More specifically, we wanted to combine the various dimensions of academic engagement and investigate their simultaneous effect on academic achievement. Studies adopting variable-centered approach have indicated how various distinct aspects of student learning are related to educational outcomes (for a review see Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012). However, such variable-oriented approach describes overall tendencies, behind which differently functioning subgroups of individuals and the complex relations between

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variables may be concealed (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997; Reizle, 2013). Thus, we adopted a person-oriented approach (see Bergman & Andersson, 2010) in order to investigate the complex associations between various dimensions of academic engagement and their combined effect on academic achievement, and most importantly, to identify distinct subgroups of students.

1.1. The varying dimensions of academic engagement

Student engagement has become increasingly relevant due to the growing pressure on students to successfully complete their studies within a specific timeframe. A high level of engagement is an important condition for performance and persistence in educational tasks and institutions (e.g., Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Overall, academic engagement has been the focus of a substantial amount of research in recent years, and has received much attention in varying educational contexts (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2004; Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2012; Schaufeli, Martínez, Pinto, Salanova, & Bakker, 2002).

Academic engagement is typically described as a multidimensional construct, but its definitions vary in the literature. Its emotional, cognitive, and behavioral aspects are the most-researched (e.g., Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Fredricks et al., 2004; Jimerson, Campos, & Greif, 2003). In the present study, academic engagement is understood to include personal meaning and motivation in studying, willingness and ability to self-regulate according to these aspects, and the emotional experiences (i.e., study engagement and exhaustion) that are involved.

Experiencing meaning in one's work has been shown to be a key component in work engagement (González-Romá, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Lloret, 2006; Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006). In an educational context, the more cynical the students were (i.e., doubting the significance of their studies), the less they were engaged (Salmela-Aro, Kiuru, Leskinen, & Nurmi, 2009; Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2012; Schaufeli et al., 2002). A cynical attitude may appear as finding a lack of interest in the subject matter (Mäkinen, Olkinuora, & Lonka, 2004) or questioning one's career choice (Hirsto, 2012).

In addition, *Self-regulated learning* (SRL; e.g., Boekaerts & Cascallar, 2006; Pintrich, 2000; Vermunt, 1998; Wolters, Pintrich, & Karabenick, 2005) is a key feature of what it means for students to be engaged in academic contexts (Wolters & Taylor, 2012). Self-regulated students have more positive and fewer negative emotional experiences within academic settings (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2000; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002; Schutz & Davis, 2000), and are considered to be actively engaged in their own learning (Wolters, 2003; Zimmerman, 2002). But being self-regulated does not necessarily mean that the student has interest in the content. Students who have little interest can also effectively self-regulate (Sansone & Thoman, 2005).

Finally, according to studies on work-related engagement (e.g., Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006), study engagement describes the subject's psychological engagement in greater detail, emphasizing the affective component of engagement (Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2013). Within this framework, study engagement is typically described as a positive, fulfilling, study-related state of mind characterized by energy, dedication, and absorption (Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2012; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Rather than a momentary and specific state, such as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), the engagement described above refers to a more persistent and pervasive affective state (Schaufeli et al., 2002) that is positively related to academic performance (Salanova, Schaufeli, Martínez, & Bresó, 2010; Salmela-Aro & Upadyaya, 2012; Schaufeli et al., 2002; Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014).

1.2. Problems in studying that predispose one to disengagement

Disengagement is often defined as student burnout in terms of *cynicism, inadequacy as a student and experiences of exhaustion* (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009; Salmela-Aro & Näätänen, 2005; Schaufeli et al., 2002). Of these, study-related exhaustion can be defined as feelings of strain, particularly chronic fatigue, resulting from taxing study (Schaufeli et al., 2002). In general, high exhaustion during studies is related to lower academic performance (Richardson et al., 2012; Stewart, Lam, Betson, Wong, & Wong, 1999). When compared to older students, freshmen have been found to experience greater stress due to numerous changes, conflicts, and frustrations (Misra et al., 2000). Experiencing such a stress during the first academic year was a substantial barrier to obtaining a degree two years later (Vaez & Laflamme, 2003).

A reasonable amount of stress, however, may be a sign of study commitment (Kember & Leung, 2006) and exhaustion can be also experienced by engaged students (Daniels et al., 2008; Ketonen & Lonka, 2013; Lonka & Ketonen, 2012; Salmela-Aro, Moeller, Schneider, Spicer, & Lavonen, 2016; Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014). Exhaustion may not be as strongly negatively related to study engagement as cynicism or sense of inadequacy as a student (Salmela-Aro et al., 2009; Tuominen-Soini & Salmela-Aro, 2014). Thus, exhaustion may be an indicator of current study stress even in the right program, whereas finding little personal meaning in studies could be a sign of deeper, more enduring problems hindering academic engagement. When prolonged, however, exhaustion may start to affect one's well-being (Misra et al., 2000), predicting postgraduate exhaustion as well (Dahlin, Fjell, & Runeson, 2010).

1.2.1. Lack of personal meaning and cynicism in studying

Experienced personal meaning may keep students motivated and committed despite challenges. Some students may be deeply interested in reflecting on the subject matter, whereas others may be more interested in directly applicable knowledge and their future profession (Lonka et al., 2008). Such practically oriented students have been found in all disciplines (Lonka & Lindblom-Ylänne, 1996; Mäkinen et al., 2004; Vermunt, 1996). Students may also select their majors merely because they find the subject matter interesting. Such study-oriented students refer to their enjoyment of studying and the desire to reflect on the subject (Byrne & Flood, 2005). Both professionally and study-oriented students have been found to succeed better than those students who are still clarifying the personal meaning of their studying (Mäkinen et al., 2004).

Students who are certain about their career choice tend to be more successful in coping with the various educational demands of higher education (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007), whereas students uncertain or undecided about their career choice exhibit both lower academic performance and lower persistence rates (Leppel, 2001), and are less committed to studying (Germeijs & Verschueren, 2007). However, some of the short-term negative consequences of early career indecision may ultimately lead to long-term positive consequences, particularly if better person-occupation fit is achieved as a result of extended search behavior (Betz & Voyten, 1997; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000).

Both certainty of one's career choice and finding the subject matter meaningful are important dimensions of successful studying, but are not necessarily in harmony with each other. If students, even when committed to a career, find their majors to be meaningless, they may change majors or even drop out (Leppel, 2001). Lack of interest can be defined as deriving no personal meaning from studies due to finding the content unmotivating and it may lead to lower achievement and even drop out (Mäkinen et al., 2004). Undergraduate students' interest in their subject has been found to clearly decrease during the first year of studies (van der Veen, de Jong, van Leeuwen, & Korteweg, 2005).

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