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# Teacher support within an ecological model of adolescent development: Predictors of school engagement

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## ABSTRACT

There is a need to further understand the development of student engagement. Ecological models of adolescent development state that proximal factors, such as teacher support, should strongly influence student engagement. Theoretical models also explain concurrent influences from the individual, family, peer, and community contexts. The current study applied an ecological model to the development of five indicators of students' engagement in school. Six hundred and sixty-five full-time Grade 11 students and an additional 54 students who had dropped out of school from Victoria, Australia, completed a *Communities That Care* survey in term 3 of Grade 10 and term 3 of Grade 11. Grade 10 risk and protective factors from the school (e.g., teacher support), individual (e.g., academic grades, prior engagement), family (e.g., family management practices), peer (e.g., antisocial peer affiliation), and community contexts (e.g., community disorganization) were modeled as predictors of five indicators of Grade 11 engagement (academic engagement, emotional engagement, school discipline, absences from school, and school dropout). Teacher support at Grade 10 had bivariate associations with Grade 11 academic engagement ( $r = 0.37$ ), emotional engagement ( $r = 0.35$ ), absences from school ( $r = -0.14$ ), and school discipline responses ( $OR = 0.64$ ). The full ecological models explained between 22 and 34% of the variance in engagement; however, teacher support did not predict engagement. Prior engagement and academic grades explained the greatest proportion of variance in students' engagement. Factors from the family, peer, and community contexts made unique contributions to some indicators of engagement. The findings suggest that there is a need to consider student engagement as a long-term process. Implications for improving students' engagement are discussed within an individualized stage-environment fit model of adolescent development.

## 1. Introduction

Although conceptualizations of student engagement may have changed, for decades teachers and members of school communities have sought to improve students' engagement in school. Traditionally student engagement has been inferred from school-based records of academic grades, suspension, attendance, and dropout (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012). More recently, self-report questionnaires have been developed to measure adolescent students' psychological engagement (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012). Much of the research on student engagement has progressed along these two complimentary lines of inquiry with insufficient consideration

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of similarities and points of difference (Wang & Degol, 2014).

Researchers have increasingly focused on student engagement "...because there is evidence that it is malleable and responsive to changes in teachers' and schools' practices" (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016, p. 1). Detailed, systematic reviews of engagement have conceptualized disruptive behaviors, attendance, academic grades, dropout, and psychological engagement as outcomes of teachers' practices and the surrounding context (Quin, 2016; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Positive youth development research emphasizes the need to identify factors from the individual, school, family, peer group, and community contexts that can be modified to promote positive and prevent negative adolescent outcomes (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004; Lerner et al., 2005).

There exists a need to apply these same ecologically informed research principles to understandings of the development of student engagement, both with school-based concerns and student-reported psychological engagement (Chase, Warren, & Lerner, 2015). This is because improving students' engagement has been viewed as the "antidote" to readily observable school-based concerns (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Marks, 2000). Furthermore, educators, policy makers, families, and researchers are increasingly viewing the improvement of students' psychological engagement (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007), long-term educational and vocational outcomes (Abbott-Chapman et al., 2013), life satisfaction (Lewis, Huebner, Malone, & Valois, 2011), and academic grades (Chase, Hilliard, Geldhof, Warren, & Lerner, 2014) as desirable goals for all students. Evidence supports the significance of engagement; for example, eighth-grade students were more likely to report higher levels of substance use, delinquency, and depression if their behavioral or emotional engagement declined between grade 5 and 8 (Li & Lerner, 2011).

### 1.1. The problem of low engagement

Frequently, students who show signs of low engagement (i.e., disengaged) in school are considered to be at risk of school dropout (Henry et al., 2012; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992). Moreover, school-based indicators of low engagement have been cited as correlates and predictors of subsequent problem behaviors and diminished health among adolescents (Kearney, 2008; Resnick et al., 1997). For example, after controlling for a wide range of risk and protective factors, US and Australian adolescents who were suspended from school were significantly more likely to engage in antisocial behavior than their peers who had not been suspended ( $OR = 1.5$ ; Hemphill, Toumbourou, Herrenkohl, McMorris, & Catalano, 2006). Elsewhere, students who reported high rates of truancy were more likely to fight frequently ( $OR = 6.27$ ), use illicit drugs ( $OR = 5.19$ ), or experience depression ( $OR = 2.88$ ; Vaughn, Maynard, Salas-Wright, Perron, & Abdon, 2013). Further, suspension from school, diminished school attendance, and academic failure often are cited as increasing the likelihood of subsequent school dropout (Henry et al., 2012; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Data indicated that as school risk factors (e.g. academic failure, suspension, poor attendance, grade retention, and poor standardized test scores) accumulated, the proportion of students who dropped out progressively increased to 85% (Henry et al., 2012). These overt signs of low engagement are not just problematic for students; teachers report that management of student disruptive behaviors is a significant cause of stress and interrupts student learning (Beaman, Wheldall, & Kemp, 2007; Crawshaw, 2015). Consequently, it is essential to understand how to improve student engagement and prevent disruptive behaviors, low attendance, and school dropout.

In addition to preventing overt symptoms of low engagement such as suspension, absences from school, and school dropout, there is a need to consider students' perceptions of school. A definition of students' engagement in school recognizes that:

...engaged students make a psychological investment in learning. They try hard to learn what school offers. They take pride not simply in earning the formal indicators of success (grades) but in understanding the material and incorporating or internalizing it in their lives.

Newmann et al. (1992, p. 3)

Student-reported engagement generally is defined as a broad construct that contains two, three, or four interrelated dimensions that capture students' overt and less readily observable, behaviors, thoughts, and feelings in response to school (Fredricks et al., 2004; Fredricks et al., 2016), which correspond with the predominant dimensions of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2016). Empirical research has tended to focus upon one dimension of engagement (e.g., Archambault, Janosz, & Chouinard, 2012; De Wit, Karioja, & Rye, 2010) or combine multiple dimensions of engagement in one outcome measure without reporting on unique engagement dimensions, such as behavioral, emotional, or cognitive engagement (e.g., Lam et al., 2012; Marks, 2000). More recently, several studies have simultaneously considered multiple dimensions and indicators of engagement (e.g., Chiu, Pong, Mori, & Chow, 2012; Conner & Pope, 2013; Lewis et al., 2011; Wang & Eccles, 2012; Wang & Peck, 2013).

The benefit of these latter studies is that when different levels (i.e., minimal, moderate, and high) and unique dimensions (i.e., cognitive and emotional) of students' engagement have been identified, the associations with outcome variables such as dropout, failure, and depressive symptoms were also unique. For example, students classified as emotionally disengaged were subsequently more likely to experience higher rates of depression. In contrast, the cognitively disengaged group of students was most at risk of academic failure, but not depression (Wang & Peck, 2013).

A large ( $n = 81,499$ ) survey of high school students indicated that 50% of respondents reported being bored every day at school and 17% reported being bored in every class (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Even adolescents attending high-achieving schools self-report that they lacked engagement (Conner & Pope, 2013). The minority (31%) of students who reported being fully engaged were more likely to report better mental and physical health and academic grades (Conner & Pope, 2013). The authors defined full engagement as regularly enjoying schoolwork (emotional engagement), exertion of effort (behavioral engagement), and valuing of assignments given (cognitive engagement). Studies such as these suggest that interventions seeking to improve students' engagement will support

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