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Student behavioral engagement as a mediator between teacher, family, and peer support and school truancy

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the associations between student's behavioral engagement; teacher, family, and peer emotional support; and school truancy. Student-reported data of 821 Finnish junior high school students were analyzed using structural equation modeling. Teacher and family support were positively associated with student behavioral engagement, which in turn was negatively associated with truancy. Behavioral engagement mediated the associations between teacher and family emotional support and truancy. The results highlight the pivotal roles of teacher and family emotional support in fostering student behavioral engagement and preventing truancy in junior high schools. Students who are attached to their teachers and parents are likely to conform to their expectations and not to play truant from school.

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1. Introduction

Absences from school for no legitimate reason i.e., school truancy, are associated with many negative school and post-school outcomes such as poor academic performance, unemployment, poor level of education, and school dropout (Darmody, Smyth, & McCoy, 2008). Hence, truancy is a cause of public concern. Despite the well-known negative consequences of school truancy, definitions of truancy vary (Sutphen, Ford, & Flaherty, 2010). The social control theory holds that when students are attached to norm-relevant significant others, such as teachers and parents, they want to conform to their expectations and accept the social norms they represent (Hirschi, 1969; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Tinga, & Ormel, 2010). As suggested by participation-identification model (Finn, 1989), if attachment to norm-relevant significant others is lacking, student may show low levels of participation in classroom activities and gradual withdrawal from school by truanting. From these two perspectives, truancy is conceptualized as a potential outcome of lacking personal attachment to those disapproving truancy and low levels of behavioral commitment to school work. Truancy in the present study is defined as absences which students themselves indicate would be unacceptable to norm-relevant others, teachers and parents (see Malcolm, Wilson, Davidson, & Kirk, 2003).

At the heart of prevention of school dropout and truancy is the concept of student engagement (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006). Engagement is a relational process activated by reciprocal interpersonal relationships (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) with junior high school being the time of waning engagement (Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kindermann, 2008). Typically, student engagement is viewed as a mediator between students' educational contexts and student outcomes (Appleton et al., 2006; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Skinner et al., 2008). Feeling supported in school does not lead to positive school outcomes unless students are actively behaviorally engaged in school activities. Facilitating student behavioral engagement is expected to lead to increased probability of positive schooling outcomes, such as academic success (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012) and school completion (Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009). Previous research suggests that students' experiences of attachment at school facilitate their behavioral engagement, which, in turn, contributes to educational outcomes (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Finn, 1989; Klem & Connell, 2004; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Wang & Eccles, 2012a) such as school attendance.

This study contributes to the literature by combining two perspectives on truancy and engagement research, namely those of social control theory and participation-identification model into the framework of engagement as a mediator. We tested a model where students' attachment to school-related others (labeled "emotional support") is expected to contribute positively to students' behavioral engagement (as suggested by social control theory). Behavioral engagement, in turn, is expected to associate negatively with school truancy (as suggested by participation-identification model). Finally, we tested whether the association between emotional support and school truancy

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was mediated by student behavioral engagement (as suggested by several engagement models) after controlling a number of statistical covariates on engagement and truancy. The expected associations are depicted in Fig. 1. Typically, student behavior at school and school attendance have been treated as parts of the same construct, “behavioral engagement” (e.g., Archambault et al., 2009). This combination is problematic as students who are inattentive and come unprepared to classes may not play truant (see Betts, 2012). Engagement studies typically examine student cognitive functioning outcomes such as academic achievement (e.g., Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012) or school completion (Archambault et al., 2009) but school truancy and academic achievement are not necessarily associated in a linear fashion as some truant youth do well academically (Maynard, Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Peters, 2012). This may indicate that the precursors of truancy could differ from those of academic achievement.

Teachers have been found to occupy a central role in promoting positive student school outcomes such as school participation (Wang & Holcombe, 2010); student behavioral engagement (Murray, 2009); school compliance (Wang & Eccles, 2012b); and effort, persistence, and participation in school work (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Veenstra et al. (2010) compared the effects of pre-adolescents' attachments to parents, teachers, and classmates on truancy. They found attachment to teachers showing the strongest negative relationship with persistent truancy, while there was no association between attachment to classmates and truancy. Parents constitute another well-documented source of emotional support, which, according to the findings by Furrer and Skinner (2003), contribute more strongly to student behavioral engagement than that of teachers and peers. Based on their longitudinal analysis, Wang and Eccles (2012b) concluded that parent social support functioned as a protective factor on adolescent self-reported behavioral engagement (school compliance). Parent support and responsiveness, unlike parental overprotection (Studsrod & Bru, 2009) or condoning disengagement from school (Attwood & Croll, 2006), prevent adolescents' school engagement from becoming negatively affected by their peers (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Fuligni & Eccles, 1993) as evidence on the contribution of peers as a source of support affecting engagement is controversial. Sometimes its impact on students' behavioral engagement has been found to be positive (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), sometimes non-existent (Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010), and sometimes negative (Wang & Eccles, 2012b) stemming from the fact that students' school-related problems tend to cluster at the peer group level (Kiuru, 2008). In such peer groups, there is a risk of development of a collective atmosphere condoning absences from school and peer deviancy training (see Mathys, Hyde, Shaw, & Born, 2013). Taken together, these results suggest that teacher and parent support may be more important than peer support with respect to student behavioral engagement. Students may be attached to their peers, but in case these peers do not have a clear normative position against truancy, they do not serve as significant others with regard to behavioral engagement (Veenstra et al., 2010).

High levels of self-reported behavioral engagement are associated with higher levels of attendance — especially in middle school students (Klem & Connell, 2004). Respectively, students reporting low participation in school activities have been found to report high rates of skipping school (Maynard et al., 2012). The association between self-reported low behavioral engagement and skipping school is high, especially among 10- to 16-year-old urban minority youth (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994).

Given the scarcity of literature on understanding the causes of truancy (Veenstra et al., 2010) and studies treating truancy as an outcome, researchers in this study set out to investigate the associations between emotional support, student engagement, and school truancy. First, we examined the associations between student-perceived teacher, family, and peer emotional support and behavioral engagement. In line with social control theory (Hirschi, 1969; Veenstra et al., 2010) and earlier empirical findings, both teacher (Croninger & Lee, 2001; Murray, 2009; Wang & Eccles, 2012b; Wang & Holcombe, 2010) and parent support (Wang & Eccles, 2012b) were expected to contribute to student behavioral engagement positively and to a greater extent than support from peers (Lam, Wong, Yang, & Liu, 2012; Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010) (Hypothesis 1). Second, drawing on the participation-identification model (Finn, 1989) and previous findings (Connell et al., 1994; Klem & Connell, 2004; Maynard et al., 2012), we expected higher levels of behavioral engagement being associated with lower levels of school truancy (Hypothesis 2). Third, as suggested by models of student engagement (Appleton et al., 2006; Connell & Wellborn, 1991), we expected student behavioral engagement to mediate the associations between students' perceptions of emotional support and school truancy after controlling relevant student background characteristics (Hypothesis 3). Concerning student background characteristics with student engagement and school truancy, we do not posit a hypothesis.

2. Method

2.1. Context

In Finland, compulsory comprehensive education lasts nine years, and during the last three years (junior high school), instruction is given by the subject teachers. Teachers follow the national core curriculum for basic education. All teachers are responsible for promoting positive proximal processes, such as student engagement in the classroom, whereas the home room teacher bears the main responsibility for monitoring student progress and reacting to lapses of school attendance. A nationwide web-based reporting system (Wilma) is employed in most schools; yet, at the time of data collection, it was not used in a consistent manner in junior high schools. Through the Wilma system, parents are requested to provide information for their children's school absences, and interventions are planned together with the school welfare team when necessary. The average number of students in a general education classroom in Finnish junior high schools is on average approximately 17

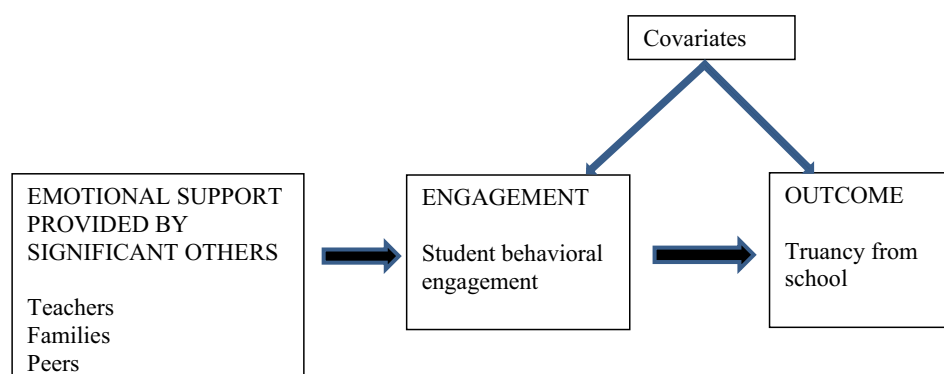


Fig. 1. Engagement as a mediator between emotional support provided by significant others and outcomes.

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