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# Student perceptions of self-efficacy and teacher support for learning in fostering youth competencies: Roles of affective and cognitive engagement

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** This exploratory study extends research on student engagement by examining the relationships between its different facets, students' perception of teacher support for learning and self-efficacy, and adaptive youth competencies. Guided by Reschly and Christenson's (2012) student engagement framework, affective and cognitive engagement were posited to mediate the relationships between students' perceived beliefs, adaptive competencies and behavior engagement.

**Method:** 3776 Singapore Grade 7 and 8 students completed a self report survey questionnaire.

**Results:** Self-efficacy and teacher support demonstrated different indirect relationships with student competencies and via different engagement pathways. Cognitive engagement mediated the effects of teacher support and self-efficacy on the four student competencies, while affective engagement's mediated effects was only evident on academic buoyancy.

**Conclusion:** This study holds important implications for educational and psychological research on student engagement, demonstrating that the construct, though theorized in a western context, has empirical utility and relevance in an East Asian context.

A burgeoning body of research on student engagement indicates that active engagement in school is critical for academic success and student adaptation. Students who attend school regularly, self-manage their studies, adhere to school rules and are active in after-school activities generally perform better. Indeed, the rapidly expanding body of research has attested to its emergence as a key summary marker of the quality of students' experiences in school that contribute to learning and achievement (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012). This paper seeks to extend the cross-cultural tenacity of the construct by exploring the relationships between its different facets as these relate to students' perceptions of self-efficacy and teacher support for learning and their adaptive competencies with an East Asian adolescent school population.

## 1. Student engagement

Student engagement is typically conceptualized as a meta-construct comprising three primary components: affective, behavioral and cognitive (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Lawson & Lawson, 2013). Drawn from prior work of scholars in the field

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that include Finn (1989) and Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), affective engagement is about a student's feelings of school belonging and positive relationships with peers and teachers in general. Behavioral engagement describes basic behaviors involved in class and school participation. Cognitive engagement consists of internal indicators involving self-regulation, and value and goals of learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). However, the state of research indicates a lack of consensus over the operationalization and concrete indicators of these subtypes (Eccles, 2016; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015). For instance, behavioral engagement and disengagement has been viewed either as two opposite poles of the same bipolar dimension or as a distinct independent construct but in negatively correlated states (e.g., Skinner, 2016; Zhou & Ren, 2017). It is in the former category where most of the empirical evidence is situated (e.g., Liem, Lau, & Nie, 2008). Similarly, cognitive engagement appears to share overlapping dimensions with some motivation concepts (such as goal setting), suggesting the need for theoretical differentiation and clarity (Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Taken together, the state of research on the construct and its subtypes highlights the need for researchers to provide more precise definition and conceptualization of each construct in each investigation undertaken (Christenson et al., 2012; Lawson, 2017).

A common observation across the research shows that engagement is often intertwined with academic motivation. Motivation refers to students' inclination, energy and drive to learn and achieve while engagement represents the observable behaviors that reflect this energy and drive (Eccles, 2016; Reschly & Christenson, 2012). Indeed, a rapidly expanding body of what Lawson (2017) termed 'Type 2' engagement research has emerged in which engagement is often casted as a behavioral variable in uncovering the complex relations between the instructional context, motivation from a specific theoretical orientation, and student's academic achievement (e.g., Cai & Liem, 2017). Reschly and Christenson (2012) argued that engagement and motivation are separate though related constructs, wherein motivation is necessary but insufficient to enable engagement. In building on the extant conceptualization of student engagement, scholars have underscored the need to draw this theoretical distinction. In this respect, 'Type 3' engagement research has emerged and represents the body of work in which student engagement is conceptualized as an umbrella construct, and motivation is subsumed with other student-level variables to describe the learning process (Lawson, 2017). This line of investigation emphasizes the importance of an integrated engagement framework that remains broad and integrative to enable deeper theorizing of its nature (Eccles, 2016). Such theorizing offers a promising conceptual model in bringing together specific personal and motivational characteristics and proximal contextual factors to explain for the different levels and patterns of engagement by students and to understand their academic trajectories (e.g., Watt, Carmichael, & Callingham, 2017). It is along this line of engagement conceptualization that this study is seeking to advance understanding of its tenacity with an East Asian student population.

## 2. Components and links in the model

Across many studies, the engagement dimensions have been associated with a broad range of school-related outcomes. Wang and Eccles (2013), for example, in examining the relationships between middle school students' perceptions of the school environment, achievement motivation, and engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive), found student perceptions of distinct aspects of the school environment to contribute differentially to the three types of school engagement. Similarly, Lam, Wong, Yang, and Liu (2012), in a study with Hong Kong junior secondary school students, found that students were engaged affectively, behaviorally and cognitively in school when they perceived parents, teachers and peers to provide social-emotional support and teachers to adopt motivating instructional practices. Engagement was high when students had high self-efficacy, endorsed learning goals and attributed their performance to effort. In sum, this line of investigation sees components of engagement as parallel indicators or facilitators in producing different patterns of student outcomes.

Distinctions in the precedence of relationships between engagement components are, however, not often salient in the literature (Janosz, 2012). In a longitudinal study, Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, and Pagani (2009), for example, found that affective and cognitive engagement evolved differently from behavioral engagement for students with overall low engagement. Likewise, Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, and Kindermann (2008) and Green et al. (2012) found a model that conceptualizes affective engagement as a predictor of behavioral engagement to have more superior heuristic value than one that positions affective and behavioral engagement as concurrent predictors of achievement. The emerging evidence suggests that different engagement subtypes make specific contribution as an antecedent or predictor and lead to different student outcomes, underscoring the need to work towards a more nuanced understanding of the construct. Research that explores the extent these different dimensions make separate and differential impact on student outcomes and the potential mediational processes each plays would deepen empirical understanding.

### 2.1. Mediating role of affective and cognitive engagement

In the conceptual model elucidating the relationships between context, engagement and student outcomes, Reschly and Christenson's (2012) posited multiple levels of development (personal, school, family and peers) to influence the extent and nature of student engagement, which in turn provide the enabling conditions to social, emotional and behavioral outcomes. Drawing from their research in 'Check & Connect' – a mentoring program that promotes school success and engagement of school dropouts, they observed that while completing learning activities and maintaining school-related behaviors are important indicators of student participation and involvement in learning, it may be inadequate to foster engagement. Students' self-perceived competence, attitudes and feelings about their involvement in learning form equally important aspects to provide a fuller picture of their engagement. That is, the researchers speculated that affective and cognitive engagement precede academic and behavioral engagement to offer a buffer against potentially disruptive effects (Christenson et al., 2012; Roeser, Eccles, & Strobel, 1998). Indeed, motivational research from different theoretical perspectives on the impact of attitudes, beliefs and affect on behaviors provide strong support to this line of

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