
Preface

Who are engaged students? And why are students engaged? What are the antecedents and outcomes of engaged students and engaging contexts? How do engaging contexts (schools, families, peers) affect students and, in turn, student outcomes? What is the relationship between engagement, learning, achievement, and other long-term outcomes, such as high school completion and college attendance? What conditions foster reengagement of students who are no longer invested in learning or school? Questions such as these have captured the interest and curiosity of international researchers from a range of disciplines, including educational psychology, developmental psychology, public health, and teacher education for the past two decades.

Active research on student engagement has occurred primarily in the past 25 years, advancing with an article in 1985 by Mosher and McGowan. There are questions and unresolved issues related to engagement, which this volume explores; however, there is also general consensus regarding a number of facets of engagement theory and research, such as:

- Student engagement is considered the primary theoretical model for understanding dropout and promoting school completion, defined as graduation from high school with sufficient academic and social skills to partake in postsecondary educational options and/or the world of work (Christenson et al., 2008; Finn, 2006; Reschly & Christenson, 2006b).
- Engaged students do more than attend or perform academically; they also put forth effort, persist, self-regulate their behavior toward goals, challenge themselves to exceed, and enjoy challenges and learning (Klem & Connell, 2004; National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine [NRC and IoM], 2004).
- Student engagement, irrespective of the specificity of its definition, is generally associated positively with desired academic, social, and emotional learning outcomes (Klem & Connell, 2004).
- Engagement is a multidimensional construct – one that requires an understanding of affective connections within the academic environment (e.g., positive adult-student and peer relationships) and active student behavior (e.g., attendance, participation, effort, prosocial behavior) (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992).
- The role of context cannot be ignored. Engagement is not conceptualized as an attribute of the student but rather as 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 (Reschly & Christenson, 2006a, 2006b). Engagement is an active image (Wylie, 2009) depicting effortful learning through interaction with the teacher and the classroom learning opportunities. In short, both the individual and context matter.

- Student engagement reinforces the notion that effective instruction explicitly considers and programs for the role of student motivation on learning outcomes (NRC and IoM, 2004; Russell, Ainley, & Frydenberg, 2005).
- The increase in student engagement measures with adequate psychometric properties has cemented the power and value of student engagement as a useful variable for data-driven decision-making efforts in schools (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Betts, Appleton, Reschly, Christenson, & Huebner, 2010; Darr, 2009; Fredricks et al., 2011).
- There is an emerging intervention database that suggests evidence-based or promising strategies for educators to employ to enhance student engagement (Christenson et al., 2008).

This volume seeks to address a number of the “unknowns” that characterize theory and research on student engagement. These unknowns, or in some cases controversies in the field, affect the advancement of research on student engagement and, consequently, our knowledge base for improving student learning outcomes. We offer the following:

- Some researchers consider student engagement a “metaconstruct” or an organizing framework – one that integrates such areas as belonging, behavioral participation, motivation, self-efficacy, school connectedness, and so forth (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), while others disagree, believing that engagement must have clearly defined boundaries (Finn & Kasza, 2009).
- Although researchers have reached consensus that student engagement is multidimensional, agreement on the multidimensionality differs from agreement on the number and types of engagement dimensions, which ranges from two to four. It may be that consensus only will be achieved with respect that student engagement is multidimensional, and, if so, researchers will need to define clearly their conceptualization in each study.
- Other methodological considerations (e.g., selection of informants, validity of self-report, common agreement of items within dimensions, development of instruments with strong psychometric properties) must be addressed if the construct and application of student engagement to practice will be advanced.
- The relationship between and/or differentiation of engagement and motivation is subject to debate (Appleton et al., 2006, 2008). What is the relationship between these two constructs? Are motivation and engagement separate? Can one be motivated but not actively engaged in a task or goal accomplishment?

Recently, there has been a proliferation of definitions of student engagement. Definitions of the terms of engagement, student engagement, school engagement, engagement in schoolwork, and academic engagement have

been offered. These conceptualizations vary further along a number of other dimensions, such as participation, behavior, action, emotion, investment, motivation, and so on (see Appleton et al., 2008). Some studies have considered engagement as a process, while others conceptualize it as an outcome (Appleton et al., 2008; Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, & Kinderman, 2008). We contend that establishing construct validity for student engagement requires common agreement regarding what comprises the engagement construct – or what engagement is and what it is not. It demands an understanding of whether engagement is the outcome, a process to other desired outcomes, or plays a dual role. The constancy of the construct across researchers – in conceptualization and measurement – is a worthy endeavor, one with practical, scientific, and policy implications.

To date, conceptual clarity and methodological rigor (e.g., use of psychometrically sound measures) have not been achieved; they are considered a prerequisite to advance the emerging construct of student engagement and its usefulness in interventions and school programs. A particular concern addressed in this volume is the apparent overlap and confusion of engagement with motivation-to-learn variables. We designed this handbook as a way to create a dialogue among engagement and motivational researchers. To do so, we invited authors to cover their research topic and to respond to the following questions:

- What is your definition of engagement and motivation? How do you differentiate the two?
- What overarching framework or theory do you use to study/explain engagement or motivation?
- What is the role of context in explaining engagement or motivation?
- Focusing on the emerging construct of student engagement, what are necessary advances in theory, research, and practice to propel this construct forward?

The 34 chapters were placed into one of these 5 parts: (1) What Is Student Engagement? (2) Engagement as Linked to Motivational Variables, (3) Engagement and Contextual Influences, (4) Student Engagement: Determinants and Student Outcomes, and (5) Measurement Issues, Instruments, and Approaches. We also solicited an expert commentary for each of the above parts, for a total of 39 chapters. As coeditors, we are grateful to both the chapter and commentary authors.

Engagement is thought to be especially important for apathetic and discouraged learners (Brophy, 2004) and those at high risk for dropping out, but the primary appeal of the engagement construct is that it is relevant for *all* students. The universal appeal of engagement is underscored by high school reform efforts that explicitly address students' motivation to learn and engagement with school (NRC and IoM, 2004). Thus, student engagement underlies school reform – or what we seek to engender for all students through the school environment, teaching, and coursework. In addition, indicators of engagement may be used for screening and early detection of disengagement; these indicators provide links to intervention targets to reengage students at school and with learning.

Establishing construct validity for student engagement is integral to its utility in classrooms and the value of future scientific studies. The authors in this volume provided definitions for student engagement, offered their perspective on engagement and motivation, underscored the role of contextual influences, and proposed a range of future research directions. It is our hope, as coeditors, that this comprehensive volume stimulates the quality of student engagement research and advances the field. Let the dialogue begin.

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