RESEARCH
BRIEF

Student Engagement

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

WHAT IS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

First defined as time-on-task behaviors[1], then, as "participating in the activities offered as part of the school program"[2] Psychology went on to define student engagement as being linked to motivation:

> "Children who are engaged show sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by a positive emotional tone. They select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity, and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest".[3]

Eventually, student engagement has emerged as a multifaceted, multidimensional concept with specific connections to social, academic and intellectual environments.[4]

[1] e.g., Fisher, et al., 1981; Brophy, 1983
[2] Natriello, 1984, p.14
[3] Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p. 572
[4] e.g., Jacobsen et al., 2010; Kuh, 2009a; Krause, 2005; Pope, 2001; Willms et al., 2009

Student engagement is now thought of as having three dimensions

BEHAVIOURAL ENGAGEMENT
participation in academic, social, and co-curricular activities

Students who are behaviourally engaged would typically comply with behavioural norms, such as attendance and involvement, and would demonstrate the absence of disruptive or negative behaviour.

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT
focusing on the extent and nature of positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school

Students who engage emotionally would experience affective reactions such as interest, enjoyment, or a sense of belonging.

COGNITIVE ENGAGEMENT
focusing on students' level of investment in learning

Cognitively engaged students would be invested in their learning, would seek to go beyond the requirements, and would relish challenge[5].

[5] Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Martin & Torres, 2016

QUESTIONS TO ASK:

☐ How can we/why should we perhaps rethink student success in terms of student engagement?

☐ What does student engagement have to do with school improvement?

WHY IT MATTERS

The opposite of an engaged student is a **disaffected student.** Psychologically speaking, "disaffected children are **passive**, do not try hard, and give up easily in the face of challenges [they can] be **bored, depressed, anxious, or even angry** about their presence in the classroom; they can be **withdrawn** from learning opportunities or even rebellious towards teachers and classmates".[6] Disaffected students

[6] Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p.572

attend school less, have **lower self-concepts, achieve less academically,** and are more **likely to drop out of school.**[7] Additionally, engagement has been **shown to decline** as students progress through the upper elementary grades and middle school, **reaching its lowest levels in high school.**[8]

AS A WAY FORWARD

Student engagement has been seen as an important **way to address** the problems of **low achievement, student boredom** and **alienation,** and **high dropout rates.**[9]

Improving student engagement is seen as a **school improvement technique**[10] since:

1 Schools are positioned to fit the "**learning needs of students**"[11]

2 Focus is on "**improving the quality of teaching and learning** in schools"[12]

3 It "enhanc[es] all students' abilities to learn how to learn or to **become lifelong learners** in a knowledge-based society"[13]

4 It requires that the work students do is **relevant, meaningful and authentic**[14]

[7] Fullan, 2001; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Noguera, 2002; Rudduck et al., 1997
[8] Marks 2000; National Research Council, 2003
[9] Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004
[10] Fredricks et al., 2011
[11] Parson & Taylor, 2011, p. 2
[12] Dunleavy et al., 2010, p. 2
[13] Gilbert, 2007, p. 1
[14] Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Dweck, 2008; Jardine et al., 2008; Schlechty, 2002

TECHNIQUES

Unlike other measurements of 'student success' or 'achievement' which are quantifiable (i.e., grades, scores on matriculation exams) student engagement can be harder to measure on a scale. This is because the definition of student engagement is contextual and is often driven by the reason for the interest in student engagement. The important elements highlighted by the definition determine the aspects to be measured and thus the tool (surveys, interviews, arts-based feedback, etc.) that is ultimately chosen to do the measurements. Once you have established the aspects of student engagement you wish to learn about in your school (i.e., behavioral, emotional, and/or cognitive engagement) and who will be doing the measuring (i.e., students, teachers, researchers) you may select your tool to establish a baseline.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS

It is important to note that scholars have remarked on the notable lack of "student voice" or student perspectives in the literature on student engagement.[1] Instead, much of the student engagement literature is written about rather than with students.[2] It is therefore important to ask for whom is information regarding student engagement for? If interest in student engagement is solely for improving retention and dropout rates, curricular relevance, institutional benefit, school marketing, or the economics linked to university attendance then it may not really be about what is 'best' for students.[3]

1   Mitra & Gross, 2009; Parsons & Taylor, 2011
2   Trowler, 2010
3   Kuh, 2009b

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