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Student Engagement as a Multidimensional Concept

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Abstract

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In the contemporary conceptualizations of education, students' and teachers' engagement is considered as an important attribute of behaviour because of the connection with the quality of teaching and learning and with the development of potentials of all the previously mentioned actors. Dealing with the phenomenon of students' engagement is important and arises from its potential contribution to the quality of teaching and learning, but also the educational and developmental empowerment of children and youth.

The significance of analysing the concept is based on the existence of discrepancy between the expressed efforts of educational policy holders to affirm the idea of the importance of students' engagement in the process of teaching and learning, and theoreticians, researchers and practitioners dealing with the education and development of children and youth.

The aim of this paper is, on one hand, to perceive the structural determinants and scientific status of the concept of students' engagement in the process of teaching and learning, and on the other hand to contribute to the understanding of the significance of specified behaviour in practice.

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1. Introduction

The interest in the field of education related to engagement in the learning process and students' engagement is particularly emphasized in the last two decades. Although it is a recent one, this engagement has been intensively researched, supplemented and changed. Over the years, researchers have analyzed engagement from a number of orientations that operationalize engagement as involving, participative, motivational, attached, self-regulated behavior, anti-alienating behavior, thoughtfulness, belonging and investment in school related content, ideas and skills (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

Originally, the engagement of students was viewed simply as a static concept, made up of three separate and disparate components, which is characterized by a linear relationship between the curriculum and developing engagement in the learning process (Yonezawa, Jones, & Joselowsky, 2009). In earlier research, engagement has been identified by *behavioral dimension*, through the behavior of students that could be easily noticed while they neglected the dimensions dependent on the context (e.g. the culture of institutions, family support, emotion and group identification of students) (Klemenčič, & Chirikov, 2015). The *cognitive dimension* of student engagement was explored especially in the field of psychology, where it has been closely identified with motivational processes and the development of metacognitive strategies. *Emotional engagement*, which was also explored as a separate dimension, related to the emotional reactions of students in the process of teaching and learning, such as interest, boredom, happiness, sadness and anxiety (Yonezawa, Jones, & Joselowsky, 2009). Today the authors represent a multidimensional approach in their research studies, using two or three dimensions as indicators of student engagement (Appleton, et. al., 2006; Veiga, 2016).

When it comes to the concept of student engagement, there is no consensus among the authors in defining the concept. Non-compliance of the terms used reflects the multifaceted and dimensional nature of the construct, which includes a variety and contrast in the expression. Although it is difficult to define the concept of engagement, this concept occupies an important place among the authors in the contemporary study of educational and parenting phenomena. In this paper we would like to point out the multiple meanings of the concept, on the need for an interdisciplinary approach and the possibility of its development in the teaching process.

2. Students' engagement: different perspectives

Engagement is an important predictor of academic success, which many authors closely link to educational outcomes (Jones, 2008; Hu & Kuh, 2002). Student engagement has primarily and historically focused upon increasing achievement, positive behavior, and a sense of belonging of the students so they might remain in school.

Learning is necessary to consider as a research process that has personal meaning for the students, and thus for their engagement. Starting from the assumption that students are generally unjustly neglected and often left out of discussions concerning their engagement in the teaching process, the authors Zyngier & McMahon (2009) sought to identify indicators of authentic engagement and explore their impact on the quality of teaching and educational leadership.

–*Instrumentalist engagement* - is based on indicators of engagement that can be perceived by observing (the number of students in certain activities and their performance on tasks). The disadvantage of instrumentalist approach is that it does not pay attention to the fundamental indicators of engagement, motivation and willingness of students to participate in activities.

–*Socio-constructivist engagement* - in this approach, engagement is implicitly represented through the concept of active learning. The emphasis is on internal motivation, group learning objectives and the respect of previous experiences, their knowledge and exchange between students and teachers. Although it encourages class participation, there is not enough data that it develops the essential and critical consideration of formal knowledge being adopted.

–*Critical-transformational engagement* - in contrast to approaches that place students in the center, as well as their interests and experiences, critical and transformative conceptions emphasize the need to use these experiences to enhance the community and society, not just the individual. Students should use personal knowledge and experience, but they also need to be critically observed and analyzed, in order to be implemented in a wider social context (McMahon, Zyngier, 2009).

Despite the terminological inconsistencies and different frames of conceptualization, authors who work in this area agree that it is a construct that reflects the key elements of the motivational process associated with learning and development (Appleton, et. al., 2006; Fredricks, et. al., 2011; Guthrie, Wigfield & You, 2012; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Skinner, Kindermann & Furrer, 2009). Although they have common characteristics, engagement and motivation of students differ. Students' engagement refers to a form of interaction with the social and physical environment that is characterized by activity, goal-orientation, flexibility, constructiveness, focus and perseverance. Engagement implies a motivating factor, but it is not sufficient for the students to be engaged. One can be motivated but not actively engage in a task (Fredricks, et. al., 2011). Academic motivation is mainly related to general desire to succeed in academic work or work on individual assignments. Students can be motivated to succeed, however, without specific engagement and effort.

Engagement can be a precondition or consequence of motivation. Academic engagement of students is a behavior conditioned by internal and external motives, and it is reflected through four forms of regulation (Levesque, et. al., 2004). *External regulation* is a form of least autonomic, extrinsically motivated behavior, or controlled regulation. It includes behavior that aims to meet external demands, to avoid penalties or ensure the desired rewards. For example, a student who studies for a particular examination in order to avoid sanctions from his/her parents shows the external control. *Introjective regulation* is a relatively controlled form of regulation of motivation in which behavior is intended to avoid the feeling of shame or anxiety or to maintain the sense of self-respect and personal value. An appropriate example is a student who studies for an exam because he/she would be embarrassed by the professor if he/she gets a bad grade. *Identified regulation* represents a more autonomous, and to a greater extent, self-determined form of extrinsic motivation when a person recognizes the importance of certain behavior identified with certain rules and accepts them as his/her own. In the educational context, this style of regulation of motivation is considered to be an indicator of school satisfaction in accepting voluntary targets institutions and the role of students. *Intrinsic motivation* is a natural

motivational tendency to act in accordance with our own internal interests and thus develop and enhance knowledge and skills.

Based on the above mentioned, the concept of engagement contrasts the failure in learning (engagement versus disaffection) and is achieved through the development of autonomy and competence of students. Autonomy refers to the need to achieve a sense of self-direction and personal control of our own behavior. Competence implies the need for effective interaction with the external (physical and social) environment and the need for a sense of success and competence (Levesque, et. al., 2004).

The research findings point out that a significant factor in encouraging student engagement represents the interaction of individual student needs and contexts (Jones, 2008; Patrick & Ryan, 2003; Reyes, et. al., 2012; Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Student engagement in the teaching process depends on the situation and the context in which learning occurs. Through interaction in the school environment, students realize what ideals, values, goals, requirements and rules of conduct the school culture promotes and emphasizes. Fredricks & McColskey (2012) explain that student engagement "cannot be separated from their environment". The students naturally tend to pursue intimacy with others in the class to have a feeling that they are effective and successful, and that their actions in class are the result of their own choice and volition. The peer group has a strong influence on the behavior of the child, his/her social, moral, intellectual and emotional development. The student, who is a member of several groups and who acquires different social roles within the group, has greater opportunities to develop more diverse social and cognitive skills compared to a student who is a member of a small number of groups or isolated because of his/her own characteristics, personal choice, or even school organization. It is therefore very important that the academic climate is characterized by fostering cooperation, positive energy, and tasks that are authentic, collaborative, and challenging.

In their study McMahon & Zyngier (2009) treat student engagement as an important social signal that causes the reciprocal reaction of support from teachers. The teacher conveys different kinds of social messages connected with his/her teaching style in order to influence students' behavior. These messages are sent by the teacher through a variety of verbal and non-verbal signs, which sometimes mean encouraging the students that they should continue with the way they started working on a specific task, sometimes they mean a response to the questions or students' behavior in general. Sometimes the teacher uses other signs to point out unacceptable forms of students' behavior. Accordingly, student engagement is encouraged by teachers who are caring and that encourage participatory and democratic climate during the class. Although it is necessary for teachers to respect the personality of students in order to encourage their engagement, the expectations of teachers are also very important. By having high expectations, teachers suggest the students that they believe in the students' abilities and competencies and in this way students are being encouraged to enhance their academic achievements even more. In the interaction with the students, characterized by high teachers' expectations, more positive nonverbal forms of communication are expressed (smiling, nodding which means approval). In contrast to that, teachers with low expectations regarding the success rate and behavior of students, ask easier questions, allow less time to respond and provide less encouragement for engagement of students.

Based on these perspectives of the authors who deal with engagement, it can be concluded that this concept is dependent on the context and needs of students (emotional dimension), closely related to motivational processes (cognitive dimension), and is reflected in an active learning approach based on measurable outcomes (behavioral dimension). Each of these aspects refers to a particular dimension of the concept of student engagement, thus points to the need of students' engagement from a multidimensional perspective.

3. Multidimensional character of the student engagement concept

The concept of student engagement is dynamic and malleable, which makes it more difficult to clearly define it but also allows research from different perspectives. In our paper we try to explain the interrelatedness of different dimensions of engagement and the necessity of exploring this concept from the multidimensional approach.

To point out the multiple meanings of this concept, we will give a definition (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010, p. 10), in which the authors have brought together the most important aspects and pointed to the complexity of the notion of engagement: 1) encompasses students' sense of belonging and connectedness to their school, teachers and peers, 2) encompasses students' sense of agency, self efficacy and orientation to achieve within their classrooms and in their broader extracurricular endeavours, 3) encompasses students' involvement, effort, levels of concentration and interest in subjects and learning in general, 4) the extent to which learning is enjoyed for its own sake or seen as something that must be endured to receive a reward or avoid sanction, 5) a variable state of being that is influenced by a range of internal and external factors including the perceived value or relevance of the learning and the presence of opportunities for students to experience appropriately-pitched challenge and success in their learning, 6) malleable by the actions of teachers.

Also, most authors (Fredericks, et. al., 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2013) accept the most common theoretical model of: behavioral engagement (involving, participation); emotional engagement (positive and negative reactions to learning, school environment, teachers and peers, a sense of belonging and value); cognitive engagement (seriousness and willingness to invest the effort necessary to understand the complex ideas and to master difficult tasks). However, the authors cite various dimensions in their studies.

Appleton et. All (2006) tried to point out in their research, the interrelatedness and impact of cognitive and psychological dimension on the behavioral and academic dimension of engagement. The authors start from the premise that relationship has been found between cognitive engagement and both personal goal orientation and investment in learning, which in turn has been associated with academic achievement. Moreover, the psychological dimension is closely associated with participation, persistence, work on assignments and so on. In fact, students who feel a genuine connection with and support of their teachers express the need and desire for engagement and manifestation of positive behavior.

Taking into account the age of students, Finn (1993) lists the levels that can be used to identify participation, i.e., the behavioral dimension of engagement. At the level of junior classes participation is initiated by teachers and is reflected through attendance, preparation and responses to direct

questions. As students mature, they take on more active roles that go beyond this level. At another level, students initiate conversation with the teacher, ask questions and do additional tasks at home or after hours, in the form of club activities, organizing seminars and the like. During time, students transfer the activities to participation outside the school context, i.e., engagement in the social community. The fourth level refers to students who are at risk of having inappropriate behavior and their involvement in school decision-making system. When these students are in question, they develop responsibility and relationship with the school in this manner.

Although the above model speaks primarily about behavioral dimension of engagement, participation is brought into close connection with the identification of students in the school context. Finn (1993) highlights two important moments in the identification of students as members of the school. The first is the internalization of the concept of belonging, i.e., the moment they experience themselves as part of the school system, students experience school as a part of themselves and their own experience. Another important milestone in the identification of students with their school is the experience of academic success. In a situation where a school experience becomes a personal experience, school success receives a personal character. Accordingly, Skinner et. all (2008), point out that engagement itself combines behavioral and emotional dimensions and refers to active, goal-directed, flexible, constructive, persistent, focused, emotionally positive interactions with the in this case, academic activities.

When we talk about mutual causal relationship between the dimensions of engagement, we can say that students need to be present and actively participate in class or be behaviorally engaged, to feel comfortable, free and connected with the group and emotionally engaged, rather than make an effort to learn and become more cognitively engaged. In this way the "behavioral and emotional engagement are preconditions of cognitive engagement" (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010, p. 9).

Intertwining of dimensions is reflected in the research procedures. Fredricks et. all (2004), in the analysis of tools that measure the dimensions of engagement, have observed that there are differences in defining the dimensions among the authors who have studied this construct previously. They cite that an example of developing participation in the classroom that can be placed within the aspect of behavioral or cognitive dimension of engagement, depending on the concept. Similarly, defining the effort students invest in learning is sometimes classified as cognitive or behavioral dimension. Interaction in the learning process is a part of the emotional as well as the intellectual sphere of engagement (Taylor & Parsons, 2011).

Eccles & Te Wang (2012) believe it is necessary to clearly define the dimensions, levels, criteria and methods of research in order to be able to improve engagement. According to them, the already existing methods of defining are too general and include the whole range of behaviors that characterize the teaching process.

Veiga (2016) stresses the importance of researching engagement as a multidimensional concept as well as the importance of constructing instruments would that quantitatively measure the criteria of each dimension. He points out that, in addition to the emotional, cognitive and behavioral dimensions we can identify the agency dimension. It has been suggested that students who are engaged and successful in their school activity tend to have a solid knowledge in various subjects, to internalize

efficient learning strategies, to obtain good academic results, to experience satisfactory interpersonal relationships, as well as a sense of community, to behave in a manner that is valued by their peers and teachers.

A shift to a more multidimensional approach to engagement already occurs and shows great promise to further the field conceptually and empirically. Yet, despite the potential of this multidimensional approach, the concept of engagement as it relates to school settings needs to be pushed further if it is to provide the evidence and clarity needed to improve students' learning and achievement.

4. Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion it can be concluded that the question of engagement is an important factor in achieving the objectives in learning and achieving success at school.

The strategy of encouraging student engagement contributes to the development of a positive school experience and motivation for learning at all educational levels. Learning strategies should be based on the active behavior of participants in the educational process, and this experience enables learning in different circumstances, activities and positions of teachers and students. Researchers found that five effective teaching practices promise to increase engagement in learning – (1) creating thoughtful, intentional designs for learning; (2) making learning meaningful; (3) building relationships; (4) improving teaching practice in the presence of peer teachers; and (5) using assessment to improve learning and guide teaching (Taylor & Parsons, 2011).

The emphasis should be on learning, discovery and exploration to help students acquire new experiences and learning strategies should be tailored to a particular style of learning. The students are expected to participate in the creation of the teaching process, and therefore more creativity is expected in the problem solving, research projects, collaborative forms of learning, and group and pair work.

The essence of improving student engagement is not to diminish the significance of the influence of teachers and other adults, but to discover and harmonize the authentic objectives and interests of the students with the teaching goals.

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