A Literature Review of Student Engagement in Learning Experiences

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Abstract

Student engagement has emerged as a critical factor influencing academic achievement, persistence, and overall well-being. Despite its importance, many students remain unmotivated, distracted, and disengaged in classrooms, often due to technology and external pressures. This literature review critically examines the construct of student engagement, exploring its definitions, dimensions, and implications for teaching and learning. Student engagement is multifaceted, encompassing behavioural, cognitive, and emotional aspects, as well as interactions between learners, instructors, and content. The review highlights how contextual, institutional, and motivational factors influence engagement, emphasising the role of self-determination, collaboration, and environmental supports. Furthermore, it underscores the evolving nature of engagement, shaped by digital learning, socio-cultural dynamics, and institutional practices. Key outcomes of engagement include improved academic performance, reduced dropout rates, and enhanced emotional well-being. By synthesising existing research, this review identifies gaps and provides a foundation for future studies on fostering meaningful and sustainable engagement in educational contexts.

Keywords: student engagement, learning experiences, academic achievement, motivation, technology, behavioural engagement, cognitive engagement, emotional engagement, institutional factors, self-determination, collaboration, and educational outcomes.

Introduction

Student engagement is widely regarded as a cornerstone of effective learning and academic success. However, its definition often lacks clarity and consistency across educational research. Engagement is commonly understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing behavioural, cognitive, and emotional components (Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong, 2008). Additionally, institutional, and environmental factors play a significant role in shaping engagement (Kuh, 2003). This emphasises the dynamic and context-dependent nature of student engagement. Despite these insights, conceptual ambiguity persists. Taylor and Parsons (2011) argue that researchers' varying definitions contribute to confusion. For instance, the distinction between "student engagement" and "school engagement" remains unclear. Furthermore, some definitions conflate engagement with related constructs such as motivation or participation, oversimplifying its complexity. This highlights the urgent need for a unified and operational definition to guide both research and practical interventions.

In addition, measurement challenges further complicate the study of student engagement. Existing frameworks often rely on observable behaviours like "time on task" while neglecting less tangible forms, such as psychological or affective engagement (Appleton et al., 2008). The reliance on self-report instruments introduces potential biases and to address these gaps, future research must prioritise the development of reliable tools that integrate both subjective and objective indicators for a more comprehensive assessment. This study adopts the following definition of student engagement informed by this review as follows: Student engagement refers to the dynamic, multidimensional process through which students invest behavioural, cognitive, and emotional energy in educationally purposeful activities. It is influenced by individual, institutional, and contextual factors and is responsive to social and cultural dynamics.

Context-Level Approach

The sources present various ways to categorise student engagement. One approach is to consider the different actors involved, leading to three main types as follows, learner to learner, learner to instructor and learner to content engagement. Learner-to-Learner Engagement emphasises collaboration and peer learning, exemplified by icebreaker discussions and group projects. Anderson (2003) stresses that this interaction is most accessible and critical for skill development and learning designs based on constructivist theories but less critical to both cognitive and behaviourist theory approaches. Learner-to-Instructor Engagement focuses on the relationship and communication between students and teachers, with elements like clear announcements and grading rubrics being important. Although highly valued by students, this type of engagement has been challenged by the explosion of online learning, especially post-COVID-19, with technology and pre-recorded video instructions becoming more prevalent. Learner-to-Content Engagement highlights students' interaction with the subject matter, where real-world applications and structured discussions play a key role. Anderson (2003) suggests that this method can influence design, assessment, or delivery/mass customisation.

Emotional-Level Approach

Another approach focuses on the psychological aspects of engagement, leading to subtypes like behavioural, cognitive, and affective (or emotional) engagement. Behavioural Engagement includes observable actions such as attending class, participating in discussions, and completing assignments (Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong; Shernoff & Hoogstra, 2001; Furlong et al., 2003; Chapman, 2003). Cognitive Engagement refers to students' mental effort and investment in learning, including self-regulation, strategic learning, and critical thinking. Affective (or Emotional) Engagement concerns students' feelings and attitudes towards learning, such as interest, enjoyment, and a sense of belonging. Also, Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) consider that engagement incorporates a wide variety of constructs. For example, behavioural engagement includes doing the work and following the rules; emotional engagement includes interest, values, and emotions; and cognitive engagement incorporates motivation, effort, and strategy use. They argue that these

parameters can change and respond to some environmental influences and thus can be studied as a multifaceted construct of behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

On the other hand, an investigation into motivation (self-efficacy and task value) and cognitive engagement in students' science achievement, Brican and Sungur (2026) found that motivational beliefs (i.e., self-efficacy and task value) positively and significantly contributed to the prediction of students' science achievement, with self-efficacy appearing as the best predictor of science achievement rather than cognitive engagement. Investigating dropout rates, Archambault, Janosz, and Fallu et al. (2008) found that the robustness of the overall multidimensional construct of school engagement reflects both cognitive and psychosocial characteristics. However, only behavioural engagement made a significant contribution to the prediction equation. Testing the association between student engagement and academic performance, the results suggest that the lowest-ability students benefit more from engagement.

Also, Gunuc and Kuzu (2014) identified six key factors in student engagement: valuing, sense of belonging, cognitive engagement, peer relationships (emotional engagement-I), relationships with faculty members (emotional engagement-II), and behavioral engagement. These align with traditional engagement domains. Parsons, Nuland, and Parsons (2014) simplified engagement to the "ABC" model—affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions—stressing that understanding these is crucial for comprehending both engagement and achievement. Other researchers like Trowler (2010) and O'Brien et al. (2022) differentiate between positive, negative, and non-engagement across these dimensions. Several other factors are known to affect student engagement, such as academic challenges, student perspectives, learning with peers, teacher experiences, and campus environment (Isaeva, Uusiatti, and Ratinen, 2024). These factors were found among students in higher education, hence improving the quality of teachers, teaching, and curriculum becomes an issue for schools. Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2008) argue on what constitutes the construct of student engagement, such as cognitive, behavioural, and psychological components and propose that student engagement is broader than school engagement as it encompasses the student both in and outside of school.

Furthermore, Alan, Kabadayi, and Cavdar's (2018) work highlights the significance of emotions and satisfaction in fostering student engagement at universities, yet it falls short of addressing the broader, systemic factors that might influence this engagement. Meanwhile, Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder (2001) raise an important point about the impact of racial-ethnic composition on student attachment, but their findings stop short of exploring how this factor might differently impact engagement itself. Lawson and Lawson (2013) offer a more nuanced perspective by examining the interaction between school environments, working-class neighbourhoods, and socio-cultural dynamics, suggesting that engagement is a complex, adaptive challenge. This viewpoint underscores the need for a multi-dimensional approach to understanding student engagement, one that goes beyond simple, one-size-fits-all solutions.

Institutional-Level Approach

Kuh (2003) connects institutional quality to engagement as the determinant of graduate quality. This includes institutional reputation and resources such as SAT scores, faculty credentials, and library holdings. Although these resources may be present, there are questions on who engages with them within the institution? Headland (2024) argues that an engaged student exhibits interest, motivation, and attention. However, this concept can be expanded to encompass areas such as governance, feedback, quality assurance, peer support, mentoring, and other activities beyond the immediate scope of a student's studies. This broader approach generally promotes overall school engagement. Axelson and Flick (2011) challenge this perspective in their studies on students' connection to their learning, classes, and institutions, arguing that it downplays the significance of less visible forms of engagement, particularly in the cognitive and emotional domains. Finn and Zimmer (2012) further emphasise that engagement is related to students' learning, multifaceted, and must be adapted through school policies and practices to enhance student outcomes and those at risk.

In addition, some other institutional factors such as peer ability, institutional density, differentiation of curriculum, and the research orientation of the institution affect student engagement (Porter, 2006). Participation is positively linked to student engagement within learning communities, including curricular, classroom, residential, and student types (Zhao and Kuh, 2004). The expectations of connections and relationships enable students to create their groups. While assessing the structural relationship between the constructs of student engagement (affective, social, cognitive, and behavioural engagement) and their impact on institutional success outcomes (institutional reputation, student well-being, transformative learning, self-efficacy, and self-esteem), the results show that student expectations and involvement have an important seeding role in student engagement. Affective engagement was the most important determinant of institutional reputation, well-being, and transformative learning. While behavioural engagement determines self-efficacy and self-esteem, cognitive and social engagement were necessary but not sufficient conditions for student success (Bowden, Tickle, and Naumann, 2021).

Motivation-Level Approach

While the sources underscore the essential role of motivation in fostering student engagement, their reliance on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation frameworks (Lizzio and Wilson, 2009) might oversimplify the complexities of student experiences. Intrinsic motivation, defined as finding inherent enjoyment and value in learning, and extrinsic motivation, driven by external rewards or pressures, are useful concepts but do not account for the myriad personal and contextual factors influencing engagement. Additionally, linking student engagement to self-determination theory (Fredericks et al., 2004; Jimerson et al., 2003; Appleton et al., 2008; Lee and Hannafin, 2016) presents a somewhat narrow view, assuming that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are universally motivating across diverse student populations. This perspective might neglect cultural, socioeconomic, and individual differences that also play significant roles in shaping student engagement.

Therefore, while meeting these needs can enhance engagement, a more holistic approach considering broader and more nuanced factors is necessary for a comprehensive understanding.

Outcomes and Effects of Engagement

While sources emphasise the positive effects of student engagement on educational outcomes like improved learning, academic achievement (Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong, 2008; Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider, 2003), increased persistence, reduced dropout rates (Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong, 2008), and enhanced social and emotional well-being (Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006; Christenson et al., 2008; Fredericks et al., 2004), a critical examination is needed. These benefits, including greater student investment and a stronger sense of belonging, may not apply universally and can overlook factors like socioeconomic status and individual learning differences. Although these positive correlations can enhance institutional reputation (Trowler, 2010), the multifaceted nature of engagement, influenced by individual, interpersonal, institutional, and societal factors, warrants a nuanced approach. Simplifying engagement metrics can risk oversimplifying the complex phenomenon.

Gaps in Student Engagement Literature

The literature on student engagement reveals several critical gaps that necessitate further research to enhance our understanding and inform effective educational policies and practices. A significant gap is the fragmented nature of European cooperation in advancing teaching and learning, which lacks a cohesive vision. Despite the fundamental importance of understanding today's students, their learning styles, motivations, and characteristics, these questions remain largely unanswered (Klemencic & Ashwin, 2015; Ashwin & Mcvitty, 2015). This lack of comprehensive understanding hinders the development of tailored educational strategies. Furthermore, European academics have been conspicuously absent from policy-making processes such as the Bologna Process, even though teaching policies profoundly impact academic territories and competencies (Ashwin & Mcvitty, 2015). This disconnect underscores the need for greater academic involvement in educational policy development to ensure that teaching practices are both relevant and effective.

The existing scholarship on student engagement predominantly focuses on identifying threshold concepts in various disciplines and their relationship to expert discourse, often at the expense of considering the lived experiences of students (Ashwin & Mcvitty, 2015). This oversight leads to a limited understanding of how engagement strategies impact different student populations. Moreover, the literature is heavily skewed towards the North American and Australasian traditions, with UK research on student engagement often not explicitly tagged as such (Trowler, 2010). This geographical bias results in a narrow perspective that may not fully account for the diverse educational contexts and cultural differences that influence student engagement.

Additionally, the literature frequently adopts a normative, reductionist approach that rarely features the student voice. There is a tendency to make broad assumptions about the homogeneity of student demographics, such as "Generation Y" or ethnic minority students, which can obscure the unique challenges and needs of these groups (Trowler, 2010). This simplification neglects the nuanced experiences of individual students, thereby limiting the effectiveness of engagement strategies. Research on enhancing student engagement in academic work is notably lacking, despite its recognised importance for student success (Newman, 1992). This gap highlights the need for more targeted studies that explore practical methods for increasing student engagement in their academic pursuits. Also, the capacity of users to benefit from educational research remains a significant yet underexplored issue (Ashwin & Mcvitty, 2015). Understanding how students and educators can effectively utilize research findings is crucial for translating theory into practice.

Another critical gap is in knowledge mediation or brokerage for educational research. This is identified as the weakest link in the research-policy transfer process, which impedes the implementation of research-based strategies in educational settings (Ashwin & Mcvitty, 2015). Addressing this gap requires innovative approaches to bridge the divide between research and practice, ensuring that educational policies are informed by robust evidence. In summary, addressing these gaps in the literature on student engagement is essential for developing a more comprehensive and effective understanding of how to foster student engagement and improve educational outcomes. By focusing on these critical areas, future research can contribute to more nuanced and practical strategies that reflect the diverse needs and experiences of students.

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