FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

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Abstract

The concept of “Student engagement” in learning has been receiving a lot of attention worldwide because it is considered as an important factor affecting the academic success of students, and it also has a significant role in assessing and improving the quality of education. Although the conceptualization of student engagement in learning varies widely according to authors and the theoretical frameworks they have adopted, there is a common agreement that concerns the multi-dimensional nature of student engagement in learning. Key dimensions of student engagement including the cognitive, behavioural, affective, and more recently, agentic engagement have been described and empirically validated. The purpose of this research was to assess and outline major factors that influence student engagement in the higher education context. In order to contribute to the existing knowledge of research and to benefit both students and educational institutions by outlining the particular aspects of learning experience that are related to student engagement in learning, a case study has been carried out, which sought to analyse the students’ learning experience as a valuable source of data. A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection was applied during the research. The collected data from the survey and focus-group interview allowed classifying the factors influencing the levels of student engagement among the research participants into five major groups: 1) communication, collaboration, active involvement into learning activities, and enriching educational experiences; 2) interactions between students, and between students and academic staffs; 3) levels of academic challenge; 4) supporting classroom and school environment; and 5) supporting family environment. These groups together unite factors that were found to influence the most on students’ willingness to participate and to involve in learning activities and on students’ perception of the significance of training and education, as well as on the desire of students to succeed academically.

Keywords: student engagement, behavioural engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, agentic engagement, learning community, school environment, family environment.

1 INTRODUCTION

Since the middle of 1990s and up to the present, student engagement has been considered as one of the most important issues faced by the contemporary educational system in general and independent educators in particular [1], [2]. Such attention to the concept of student engagement easily understandable, as students who are engaged into the learning process are more likely to succeed academically and less likely to drop out of school [3], [4], [5]. Engaged students usually pursue academic degrees, while those, who do not engage in learning, are more likely to drop out of school. Evidently, educators are primarily aimed in enhancing student engagement because it is one of the major strategies for student retention and academic performance improvement [1], [2], [5]. Given the great social and economic outcomes that stand behind the concept of student engagement, it is completely reasonable for educational facilities and institutions to search more for theoretical and practical approaches, able to assist in attainment of the major social goal of education.

Student engagement refers to the level of a student’s active involvement in learning activities [6] or in institution more generally [7], [8]. It is a multidimensional construct that consists of several distinct and highly inter-correlated aspects of involvement. According to different engagement theorists, student engagement ranges from behavioral engagement to emotional engagement, to cognitive engagement, and to agentic engagement. For the past more than twenty years, the concept of student engagement has been recognized as one of the major factors contributing to desirable collegiate outcomes [9]. However, the definition and the method used in measuring student engagement vary from studies to studies [10]. Student engagement can be defined as involvement or commitment. Consequently, student engagement can be defined as student involvement or student commitment. Similarly, Astin’s theory of student involvement noted that students learn by the concept of being involved. Beyond this definition, student engagement is also said to be multidimensional by nature [11]. Such multidimensional nature
of student engagement has slowly shaped the concept into both a strategy for improving educational achievement and as an independently valuable outcome of schooling [10]. Student engagement is also used to describe students’ willingness to participate in routine school activities, such as attending class, submitting school work, and following class instructions. Some researchers considered student engagement to include students’ participation in lesson and curriculum planning, classroom management, and other pedagogical involved tasks [12]. Other studies even defined engagement in terms of interest, effort, motivation, time-on-task; the time student spent on a particular learning task [13]. More recently, the concept of student engagement has placed much interest in the influence of school context, more specifically in the relationships between campus climate and students’ experience of engagement.

As student engagement is widely presumed to be malleable, it is relevant to both explore the predictors of school engagement and outline factors that can be stimulated in order to positively influence it. Therefore, in light of the described positive consequences of student engagement, the current study aims at contributing to the growing body of research by exploring the mechanisms of influence on student engagement. By illuminating factors that produce the greatest influence on student engagement, in particular, by outlining such factors that increase it, the current research makes a significant contribution into both theoretical and practical frameworks on student engagement. On the one hand, the researcher’s thorough examination of the case under study can be utilized as a starting point and a background for further, more extensive research with a wider sample. On the other hand, the findings of the research can be widely applied in contexts similar to that under examination. Correspondingly, consideration and practical application of the research findings is likely to allow schools and teachers to engage students into learning more effectively.

2 METHODOLOGY

The research took place at Vietnam National University, Hanoi in Vietnam. The participants for the study were chosen among second-year and fourth-year students. In this particular case, the process of selection of the participants depended on two main criteria: a) students’ school/class attendance, and b) average accumulated grade. These criteria were chosen as indicating student engagement. Particularly, high-achieving students, those whose average accumulated grades were higher than 3.0/4.0, were surveyed (100 students), and selectively interviewed (6 students). The intentionally chosen purposeful sample allowed the researcher to better understand the studied phenomenon and outline specific factors that associate with enhancement of student engagement within the examined setting.

The students comprising the sample of this case study were asked to participate in a survey, one of the purposes of which was to find out which specific activities and experiences attracted students into learning during the school year. The students were proposed to choose among such options as the quality of teacher instruction, the use of technology by the teachers and/or by the students, availability and character of feedback from teachers, extracurricular activities such as sports, clubs, and concerts, the school climate and its capability to encourage social and emotional well-being, and family engagement to mention a few. Additionally, the students were encouraged to clarify the extent to which one or another option contributed to their overall enjoyment with school and learning experience. Apart from this, some randomly selected participants were asked to participate in focus group interviews.

The survey was used as a major means of verbalized data collection on student engagement basing on paper-based questionnaires. This method of data collection was chosen because it allows examining individual opinions regarding the issue under attention. To further enhance the likelihood of survey to reflect personal views of the participants, both unstructured and structured questions were used on the questionnaires. In an unstructured question, the participant supplies the answer on his/her own, which means that such question does not constrain individual responses. Structured questions, on the other hand, are easier for respondents to complete, are less time consuming for the respondent, and are easier to analyze, as, for the analysis of data collected through structure items, software programs, such as Excel and SPSS, can be effectively utilized. Additionally, the response rates are often higher for the structured, rather than unstructured surveys. For this reason, both unstructured and structured questions were utilized to ensure that the collected data reflects student engagement and factors that enhance it from the perspective of students. Being a qualitative study, the survey did not aim at establishing frequencies. Instead, it aimed at determining the diversity of perspectives within a chosen context. Rather than calculating the values of variables, this survey aimed at establishing the meaningful variation of values within the studied sample in a chosen setting. The survey involved only one empirical cycle due to relatively good prior knowledge on the phenomenon under attention. Still, the obtained
results, which involved categorization of the responses into themes, were used to generate hypotheses, which were further tested through the interviews.

A focus group interview was chosen as the second method of data collection. On the one hand, this method allows better control over the type of information received by the researcher, as the researcher can ask specific question to elicit particular information. Thus, the researcher is the one who determines the direction an interview is likely to assume. On the other hand, the focus group interview allows participants to better describe personal information and/or their point of view on the investigated phenomenon. Group discussion is the distinguishing feature of this kind of interview in the context of which the interviewees are encouraged to respond to each other and, thus, develop a discussion on the investigated topic. In light of estimation of student engagement patterns and factors that influence them, the application of this kind of interview is particularly promising as a means to gain insight into the views and experiences of students. Still, as a method of data collection, interview is related with certain disadvantages. For instance, the collected data may be deceptive and provide the perspective the interviewee wants the researcher to hear. Additionally, the presence of the researcher can affect the way an interviewee responds. To lessen the likelihood of occurrence of these disadvantages and increase the possibility of collection of the honest, truthful data, focus group interview type was chosen for the study. As Conway (2014) acknowledged, focus group interview can effectively serve as both analysis and data collection [14]. Conducted at such a period of time, when the researcher has already begun preliminary analysis of earlier collected data, it enables to use the focus group to follow up on early findings. A group of six randomly chosen students comprised a focus group with which a semi-structured interview was conducted. All the participants were encouraged to talk and to take their turns. To ensure the clarity of data collection, the interview was first audiotaped and, afterwards, transcribed. The focus group interview was utilized to test the hypotheses that were made based on the data collected through the survey.

3 RESULTS

The major purpose of this research was to illuminate particular factors influencing student engagement. A survey and focus group interview were conducted to estimate the self-reported student engagement in context of the examined learning environment, which corresponded to student perspective on the topic. While conducting the research, the researcher sought to respond to the following research questions: a) What did students enjoy about school that engaged them into learning?; b) What are student perceptions of engaging learning activity, classroom, and school?; and c) How to further enhance student engagement within the studied context? With regard to the multiple themes that precipitated from the collected data, five major groups of factors were outlined as affecting student engagement and, correspondingly, student academic achievement in context of the examined case: 1) communication, collaboration, active involvement into learning activities, and enriching educational experiences; 2) interactions between students, and between students and academic staffs; 3) levels of academic challenge; 4) supporting classroom and school environment; and 5) supporting family environment. The results, which correspond to the outlined clusters of factors, are reported with regard to the major categories and themes and discussed from the perspective of the research questions.

Both the survey and the focus group interview intended to explore the attitudes of the participants toward their school. The students were encouraged to reveal their opinions regarding the particular characteristics and features of the school that made the attendance more interesting and learning more engaging during the school year. The analysis of the obtained data allowed outlining several major themes to answer the first research question. In particular, the participants were asked directly regarding the aspects that they liked most about school. The majority of students responded that they valued school as a place where they “socialized with peers,” “met new people,” and “gained new skills and knowledge”. Additionally, many had responded that school was a place where they could get support from peers and teachers. Feeling emotionally supported and respected by teachers and classmates was found to contribute greatly to the participant’s overall satisfaction with school. When asked to outline the features of school that attracted them the most, the participants tended to use the following words and phrases: “collaboration”, “support”, “safe place”, “sense of belonging”, “community life participation”, “communication”, “fair attitude”, “fair treatment”, “freely expressing thoughts”, and “interesting events” among others. The students also accentuated that they particularly enjoyed school when their achievements were noticed and recognized by others, both teachers and classmates. These findings were consistent with the previous research. In particular, they were supportive of the conclusions of Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, and Salovey (2012), who found that students felt more comfortable and engaged in classrooms where they were respected and supported, as well as encouraged to cooperate
with one another [15]. As evident from the findings, the participants devoted considerable attention to communication with peers and peer emotional support as features of engaging school experience. This widely corresponded to the findings of Wang and Eccles (2013), who hypothesized and found a positive association between the peer emotional support and behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement [16]. It was evident from the case study and from a wide body of previous research, strong social networks were necessary for the school experience to be engaging. Most of these studies also suggested the need for a learning community to be developed and the importance of sense of belonging to such a community in students. The results of the case study supported such a need, showing that students enjoyed the sense of belonging to a community and the participation in community life events.

The participants were also eager to reveal some negative aspects of their school environment. The majority of the students outlined peer conflicts and strict teachers who screamed during the class as the most distressing factors that made school experience less satisfying. The respondents acknowledged that they provoked anxiety and contributed to a sense of helplessness among the students. Peer conflicts were characterized by the focus group as “distracting” and “threatening”. As for the teacher’s instructional styles, the students responded that it was challenging for them to comprehend the task when the teacher screamed in class or shouted at someone. They were afraid to make a mistake and felt helpless, preferring to be silent rather than participating in an activity. These findings were relevant in context of the existing research. Considerable portion of studies that were earlier reviewed in context of this research stressed the importance of the quality of teachers’ instructional style and the great influence teacher-student interaction had on students’ engagement into learning activities and academic achievement in general [16], [17]. The findings provided a strong support for the need to maintain a high quality of teachers’ instructions. According to the outcomes of the current research, supportive teachers were found to positively contribute to student engagement. By attaining and maintaining positive classroom emotional climate, they also maintained respectful relationships between teacher and students and between students in the class, which confidently supported the suggestions of some academic studies [3], [15]. In contrast, teachers who maintained classrooms with neutral or negative emotional climates were found to have little or no emotional connection with their students. This resulted in discomfort, boredom, and confusion among students and often coupled with poor performance. As Reyes et al. (2012) claimed, in these classrooms, students felt threatened and were uncertain about how to approach the teacher [15]. In addition, as Wang and Eccles (2013) found, teachers who were clear about their expectations supported greater behavioral participation in academic tasks, while inability to clearly express one’s expectations was likely to lead to behavioral and emotional disengagement [16].

Some relationship between school attendance enjoyment and general attitude to learning was found as well. The students, who were found to be less actively involved into learning (lower grades and less likely to voluntary participate in learning activities), referred to their studying as “boring” and “useless”, reporting that they could find little connection between theoretical knowledge they gained at school and practical issues in real life. The highly involved students (often and rather active participants or various in-class activities and eager respondents to teacher’s questions), in contrast, considered their learning to be of great value. They strongly believed that it was important for their future education and careers. Interestingly, the respondents who underestimated the value of their learning, tended to avoid after-class discussions of learning activities. Instead, as became evident from the observations, most of them, particularly boys, preferred to discuss video games with their classmates. Similarly, they were unlikely to share their education-related concerns with their parents, who frequently were too busy to provide an adequate supervision to their children. Those who valued their education, in contrast, were much concerned with the tasks they received, discussing them after classes with classmates and with parents.

The observed associations between the general attitude to learning such as perception of the value of learning and the school experience enjoyment, as well as engagement into learning, were fully consistent with prior research. Providing confident support to some prior academic studies, for example, Phillips (2015), Bock & Erickson (2015), current results strongly suggested the importance of the comprehensive to student’s link between the in-class activities and the real-life situations [1], [18]. It was indicated by the findings that the presence of such a link, evident to students (at least based on their perceptions), significantly contributed to their interest in participation in learning activities. Solving real-life problems that extend beyond the classroom contributed to the perceived relevance of instruction and, correspondingly, to student engagement.

Upon analysis of data obtained during the case study, several themes were outlined to answer the second research question of “What are student perceptions of engaging learning activity, classroom, and school?” It turned to be relevant to categorize the estimated themes into two major categories of
Several clear themes were outlined as a result of the data analysis process. The first theme noted in the data was the connection between parent engagement and student engagement. The responses to both the survey and the interview clearly reflected that parents’ expectations and availability of a role model at home positively contributed to student engagement. The data indicated that students, whose parents were reported to hold greater expectations regarding their children’s academic achievements, were more active during in-class activities and expressed greater interest regarding participation in extracurricular activities. The students from such families had showed better attendance, were more active during the class activities, and made more efforts to complete their homework. These children reported to be satisfied with the amount of homework they received. In contrast, children, whose parents reported to being less engaged, spent less time doing their homework and, on average, had worse attendance records. It was strongly suggested by the findings that lack of adequate parent supervision had a negative effect on children; academic performance and overall engagement into learning. Compared to their peers from engaged families, children from less involved or uninvolved families were unsatisfied with the amount of their homework. Frequently, they failed to complete home tasks because of lack of focus on homework. In some cases, lack of role models at home was pared with the need to take care of younger siblings or with other time-consuming home responsibilities. Children, whose parents were less involved, reported less interest in pursuing greater academic achievements. They turned out to be less equipped to recognize the practical value of education, of which claims of uselessness of studying suggested. In addition, parent involvement was found to affect self-advocacy in children, particularly, in context of their interactions with teachers. Children, whose parents were reported to be more involved, were found to be more active in class and more likely to actively advocate their points of view on discussed topics. Children, whose parents were less engaged, tended to avoid self-advocacy. They reported that their parents tended to perceive teachers as “always right”, which undermined the motivations for self-advocacy. The responses enabled to distinguish family environment as an important cluster that united factors influencing student engagement in the case under analysis. Supportive family environments considerably encouraged students to engage in learning. Lack of support from family, on the other hand, was found to result in lack of engagement.

The findings corresponded to conclusions presented in some prior studies such as Kraft & Dougherty (2013), Mutch & Collins (2012), primarily, because they supported the importance of family engagement as an amplifier of student engagement [2], [19]. The observed differences in in-class behaviors and attitudes to learning in students, whose parents were involved, and students, whose parents paid little attention to supervision of their children, supported the idea of conceptualization of parent involvement as a tool for raising student achievement [19]. They were also consistent in context of earlier discussed studies, which claimed that effective interaction between school and family could stimulate student engagement in a rather short period of time [2], [17], [19]. As evident, the findings strongly suggested the connection between parents’ recognition of the importance of education, testified by family involvement into student’s learning, and the student’s ability to comprehend the value of education and its practical importance. The character of this connection may require closer examination by the future research.

The second theme outlined from the data suggested the connection between teacher’s instructional style and student engagement, as well as perception of the classroom and learning activities as engaging. Most responses showed that supportive classroom was positively perceived by most of the respondents. In particular, the members of the focus group referred to “clearly explained tasks”, “real-life examples”, “autonomy during some activities”, “connections between school activities and personal interests”, “working in teams”, “having choice”, and “freely communicating points of view during the discussions” among others as the major features of engaging classroom. The respondents acknowledged that they used to become particularly engaged into learning activities when they clearly comprehended the teacher’s expectations and when they had an opportunity to take part in decision-making, thus taking certain responsibility and gaining sense of personal satisfaction. The respondents outlined teacher’s praise as one of the factors that contributed to the desire to take an active part in in-class learning activities. In contrast, teachers screaming or shouting in the classroom were reported to produce negative influence on student satisfaction with the courses and on student engagement into class activities. Lack of comprehension of tasks was also outlined as a disengaging feature of learning activity. Both of them prevented students to take an active part in class activities and discussions, thus contributing to the sense of helplessness and boredom. Correspondingly, supportive classroom environment and interactions between students and teachers became distinguished as other two
clusters of factors, producing considerable impact on student engagement. These findings were consistent with the prior research such as Bock & Erickson (2015), Kraft & Dougherty (2013), and Reyes et al (2012) [18], [2], [15]. Similarly, they suggested the importance of teachers' instructional styles. They indicated the need to support student autonomy and provide clear structure of the learning activity. These interventions were found to encourage student engagement. The findings also corresponded to a wide body of research on teacher-student interaction and on the need for emotionally supportive classroom [20], [15], [16], [17]. Likewise the earlier discussed studies, this case study indicated that the quality of emotional connection between the teacher and the student, as well as between the students in the classroom, was crucial for the development of supportive in context of student engagement learning environment.

The third major theme that was found during the study referred to the technology use. Teacher's use of technology was found to positively contribute to the student's interest in learning. Similarly, the respondents reported that they were more captivated by the in-class activities that allowed them or required them to use computers. The lessons in which students could use computers were outlined to be more interesting and more engaging. On the other hand, video game usage among males was found to challenge student engagement. As the data indicated, males who spent great amount of time playing video games attributed less attention to homework, had problems with getting enough sleep, and were less active during the classes. Thus, communication, collaboration, active involvement into learning activities, and enriching educational experiences were outlined as another important cluster of factors influencing student engagement in the case under analysis. Consistent with the prior research, these findings supported the great potential of application of technological advances in studying and learning suggested by previous studies in the field such as Burgess (2015), Canada, Sanguino, Cuervos, & Santos (2014), and Conradi (2014) [20], [21], [22]. Implementation of technology into the teacher's instructional style, on the one hand, was found to effectively enhance teacher-student communication and, on the other hand, allowed greater student autonomy and student responsibility over the outcomes of learning activities [22].

Finally, the data provided strong support for the connection between persistence in pursuing academic achievement and participation in extracurricular activities, which widely corresponded to the findings of previous studies [5]. Students were active during the classes reported to be active after the classes as well. These students actively participated in sports and took foreign language courses. Simultaneously, these respondents reported to have enough time for their homework. The perception of the levels of academic challenge was found to differ greatly among the engaged and the disengaged students. The perception of the value of education and the opportunities for its application in the future were found to differ as well, which corresponded to previous research such as Jensen (2013), and Lee & Bierman (2015) [23], [24].

Overall, the results of the survey indicated that most of the students sampled were engaged in their learning, because they were active during the classes and revealed enthusiasm regarding their home tasks. However, both the survey and the focus group interview strongly suggested that, depending on the particular aspect of student engagement – behavioral, cognitive, or emotional, the participants revealed varying degrees of engagement. Highly engaged students enjoyed their school attendance, actively participating in both most learning activities and extracurricular events. Disengaged students, on the other hand, reported to be less involved into learning, paid less attention to their home tasks, were less likely to attend extracurricular events, and saw little connection between in-class activities and personal interests, as well as real-life situations. As the data showed, disengaged students often lacked supportive family environment and, thus, had no role-model at home to follow. As for the teacher-student interaction, they were found to show little self-advocacy. The sense of helplessness in these students increased when they did not comprehend the task or were taught by a teacher who screamed in class.

Correspondingly, in order to further enforce student engagement within the studied context, it was found to be necessary to resolve the outlined problems. The research suggested that this could be achieved through increased attention to the presented clusters of factors: communication, collaboration, active involvement into learning activities, and enriching educational experiences; interactions between students and teachers; levels of academic challenge; supporting classroom environment; and supporting family environment [2]. It was found that the listed clusters of factors were closely correlated. Thus, in order to enhance communication, collaboration and active involvement into learning activities, it was found to be necessary to attain and maintain a supportive classroom environment, in context of which the interaction between the teacher and the students would be encouraging and emotionally supportive rather than neutral or negatively demanding. This finding widely corresponded to several previously discussed academic studies [15], [16], [17], [20], [23]. As suggested in the mentioned studies,
teacher-student interaction often left permanent impressions on students. Therefore, teachers should be encouraged to show sincere interest in both students' learning and their personalities, as well as to praise students' academic achievements. This study also found positive connection between the student's capability to handle challenging academic tasks and availability of supportive family environment. This finding also turned out to strongly support some earlier made suggestions [2], [19]. Additionally, they supported the need to keep parents involved: parents who were aware of children's progress were found to have more chances to promote the longing for academic achievement in their children.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research was to explore major factors that influence student engagement in a middle school context. Prior to the research, a literature review was carried out. On the one hand, it revealed the popularity of research on student engagement among members of contemporary academic community. To a wide extent, it responded to the need for practical guidance on how to make the learning experience of students more engaging. On the other hand, literature review indicated a clear need for further research that would contribute to the systematization of the extensive but quite chaotic body of knowledge on the topic. With this regard, a case study was carried out, in terms of which 100 students of second-year and fourth-year classes were surveyed, and encouraged to participate in a focus-group interview. During the case study, the researcher sought for both external factors influencing student engagement and the ways to classify them. This case study was developed to respond to the following specific research questions: a) What did students enjoy about school that engaged them into learning?, b) What are student perceptions of engaging learning activity, classroom, and school?, and c) How to further enforce student engagement within the studied context? During the intervention period, the researcher collected a rich body of valuable information that addressed each of the outlined research questions.

The qualitative data from the students' responses to the survey questions, and responses to focus-group interview questions were presented in the results section. The findings were classified so that to respond to the research questions. Each question was answered through the analysis of the collected data. The results indicated that the factors that influenced student engagement in context of the conducted case study can be categorized in the following manner: 1) communication, collaboration, active involvement into learning activities, and enriching educational experiences; 2) interactions between students and teachers; 3) levels of academic challenge; 4) supporting classroom environment; and 5) supporting family environment. Each of the five clusters of factors to greater or lesser extent was found to produce influence on students' desire to participate in learning activities and students' perception of the importance of learning. Widely, most factors found during the case study as rather influential corresponded to those suggested by prior research and acknowledged during the literature review. The case study strongly suggested that in order to stimulate student engagement, it is necessary to develop interventions that address each of the outlined clusters of factors.

REFERENCES


