

A VOLUME IN
RESEARCH ON SOCIOCULTURAL INFLUENCES
ON MOTIVATION AND LEARNING



SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Theory, Research, and Practice



Edited by
Gregory Arief D. Liem, Jennifer A. Fredricks, and Zi Yang Wong

Sociocultural Perspectives on Student Engagement Theory, Research, and Practice

15th Volume of the Book Series
Research on Sociocultural Influences on Motivation and Learning

Series Editor

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Endorsements for *Sociocultural Perspectives on Student Engagement: Theory, Research, and Practice*

“In 2001, Dennis McInerney and Shawn Van Etten edited the first volume in the series, *Research on Sociocultural Influences on Motivation and Learning*. For many educational researchers, especially those from a strictly cognitive tradition, the ideas and themes of this initial offering were insightful and transformative. Now, with the 15th volume in this series, *Sociocultural Perspectives on Student Engagement: Theory, Research, and Practice*, Liem, Fredericks, and Wong have expertly carried on that sociocultural tradition. In this latest volume, Liem, Fredricks, and Wong have succeeded in enriching and extending current theoretical and methodological understandings about student engagement—one of the most popular and complex constructs populating contemporary motivational literature. The international scholars contributing to this volume offer a panoramic view of engagement—from describing various models and forms to addressing social influences and modes of assessment—all from a sociocultural vantage point. For any educational researcher or practitioner interested or invested in student engagement, this edited volume and the critical knowledge it contains is unquestionably a ‘must-have.’”

—Dr. Patricia A. Alexander, Distinguished University Professor and Jean Mullan Professor of Literacy, University of Maryland

“The seminal IAP series *Research on Sociocultural Influences on Motivation and Learning* founded by Dennis McInerney has been a must-read for scholars interested in motivation and learning since its inception. The current volume represents a key extension with its focus on student engagement, a construct receiving extensive attention over the last 20 years. As is true of motivation, it is imperative to understand engagement from a sociocultural perspective. Because of their own work on engagement in different cultures, the editorial team of Liem, Fredricks, and Wong are an ideal one for this volume.”

—Dr. Allan Wigfield, Professor Emeritus of Human Development, University of Maryland College Park

“The authors of this volume have added immeasurably to our understanding of student engagement by focusing on how culture shapes the conceptualization of the construct. Existing and new theoretical models of culture and engagement and identification of critical factors for youth living beyond the Western context advance our knowledge base. Particularly noteworthy is the intentional stepping away from a dominant focus of sociocultural factors for white middle-class students by assessing varied ethnic minority youth and their contexts for development and learning.

The laser focus of the editors and authors on serving the needs of culturally and ethnically diverse youth across the world makes the research and educational policy and practice recommendations and interventions presented in this volume an invaluable resource.”

—Dr. Sandra L. Christenson, Professor Emeritus of Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota

“This volume, *Sociocultural Perspectives on Student Engagement: Theory, Research, and Practice*, edited by leading scholars Gregory Arief D. Liem, Jennifer A. Fredricks, and Zi Yang Wong, offers a timely and impactful exploration of how cultural, familial, and community contexts shape student engagement. Bringing together insights from prominent voices, this collection provides invaluable perspectives that deepen our understanding of student engagement beyond the individual, acknowledging the importance of systemic and contextual influences. It’s an essential contribution to the field, equipping educators and researchers with strategies that are both inclusive and effective.”

—Dr. Akane Zusho, Professor of Educational Psychology, Fordham University

“Student engagement continues to be a popular construct because of its known relationship to powerful learning and positive youth development. As engagement’s popularity has grown, so have extant conceptualizations of the engagement construct. This diversity of field has made it challenging for researchers and scholar-practitioners to know how to best fit various engagement theories to particular problems of practice. Liem, Fredricks, and Wong’s book provides readers with a one-of-a-kind, rigorous, and comprehensive overview of different engagement theories, models, as well as recent conceptual developments. This impressive effort provides a powerful road map for enhancing engagement research and its use for a broad scholar-practitioner audience.”

—Dr. Michael A. Lawson, Department Head of Educational Studies, University of Alabama

Research on Sociocultural Influences on Motivation and Learning

Gregory Arief D. Liem, Series Editor

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Sociocultural Perspectives on Student Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

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CHAPTER 1

SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Recent Advances and New Insights

Gregory Arief D. Liem, Jennifer A. Fredricks, and Zi Yang Wong

Student engagement and *student motivation* have emerged from closely connected, though distinct, bodies of literature and fields of study (Skinner & Raine, 2022). Current theoretical perspectives view student engagement as an outcome of motivation (Reschly & Christenson, 2022; Skinner & Raine, 2022). While interest in understanding sociocultural influences¹ on student motivation began over half a century ago (e.g., Maehr, 1974a, 1974b), the sociocultural perspective on student engagement has only gained scholarly attention more recently (e.g., Skinner et al., 2022; Wang, Degol, et al., 2019). This delayed focus on sociocultural influences on student engagement may not be surprising, given that significant academic interest in the construct has only surged in the last 20 years, notably following the seminal 2004 paper by Fredricks and her colleagues, “School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence.” In this influential work, Fredricks et al. acknowledged the impact of “family, community, culture, and educational context” on engagement (p. 73), though they concentrated primarily on the influence of educational contexts in their review. An overarching goal of this volume is to address that gap by focusing on the role of the family, community, and culture on student engagement.

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In this introductory chapter, we present the theoretical foundations of student engagement, emphasizing the importance of understanding this construct through sociocultural lenses. We begin by providing an overview of student engagement, exploring its dimensions, characteristics, and relevance to policy and practice. We then outline two theoretical approaches—bioecological and sociocultural—that scholars in the field have used to conceptualize, model, and frame their understanding of social and cultural as well as situational and contextual influences on student engagement. Next, we highlight existing gaps in the literature, which naturally lead us to the formulation of the mission and vision of this volume, shaping our invitation to contributors and the chapters they authored. Finally, we provide an overview of the volume’s structure and organization, briefly summarizing each chapter.

WHAT IS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT?

Student engagement is commonly defined as “a student’s active participation in academic, co-curricular, or school-related activities and commitment to educational goals and learning” (Christenson et al., 2012, p. 816) and as “the quality of children’s participation in or involvement with school activities” (Wang, Degol, et al., 2019, p. 1087). In their 2004 paper, Fredricks et al. (2004) introduced a tripartite model of engagement encompassing emotional, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions. On the one hand, this framework has been highly successful in sparking research interest in the construct. On the other hand, subsequent research has shown significant variation in how engagement is conceptualized and measured (Azevedo, 2015; Fredricks, 2022). For example, a recent systematic review by Wong and colleagues (2024), highlighted this diversity, identifying distinct indicators for each dimension: eight for affective engagement (e.g., teacher-student relationships, academic emotions), six for behavioral engagement (e.g., effort, school compliance), and six for cognitive engagement (e.g., cognitive strategies, value beliefs). While efforts to clarify these concepts are ongoing—such as Wong and Liem’s (2022) proposal to differentiate between learning engagement and school engagement—the issue remains “naggingly persistent” (Reschly & Christenson, 2022, p. 4).

Despite the diverse perspectives on how student engagement should be operationalized, scholars (e.g., Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Wang, Degol, et al., 2019) generally agree on its core characteristics. They identify student engagement as (a) multidimensional, (b) multilevel, and (c) malleable. Each of these aspects is explored below.

Multidimensional. Building on a series of influential papers (e.g., Fredricks et al., 2004; Furlong et al., 2003), student engagement is now widely

recognized as a multidimensional construct—or meta-construct—encompassing at least three core dimensions: affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement. *Affective engagement* refers to students' emotional responses to academic work, peers, teachers, and the broader school environment (Fredricks et al., 2004). It is also referred to as relational (Kim & Suárez-Orozco, 2015) or psychological (Appleton et al., 2006) engagement. The literature presents various ways to operationalize and assess affective engagement. For example, it has been defined as students' energized emotions during learning (e.g., enthusiasm, interest; Skinner et al., 2009), emotional experiences at school (e.g., feeling happy at school; Fredricks et al., 2005), feelings of relatedness or perceived support from peers and teachers (Appleton et al., 2006), and the extent to which students identify with and value their school (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Behavioral engagement refers to students' observable participation in classroom and school-related activities (Fredricks et al., 2004). It is also known by various terms, such as academic engagement (Appleton et al., 2006), effortful engagement (Hughes et al., 2008), and participatory engagement (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Perspectives on behavioral engagement also vary depending on researchers' theoretical and research focuses. Some define it in terms of school conduct and compliance or cooperative participation in classroom activities (Fredricks et al., 2005; Ladd & Dinella, 2009; Wang et al., 2011), including indicators like attendance, homework completion, and adherence to class and school rules. Others view it as involvement in extracurricular activities, such as participation in school-based clubs and student government (Finn, 1989). Additionally, some scholars expand the definition to include the exertion of effort and persistence in schoolwork (Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Skinner et al., 2009).

Cognitive engagement involves students' psychological or intellectual investment in learning (Fredricks et al., 2004). It is typically indicated using deep cognitive and metacognitive strategies, such as planning, monitoring, and regulating, as opposed to shallow learning strategies like rote memorization (see Greene, 2015, for a discussion on deep and shallow cognitive engagement). Beyond strategy use, cognitive engagement is assessed through measures of mental effort (Wang et al., 2018) and a cognitive and motivational orientation toward school and learning, including goals and aspirations (Appleton et al., 2006). Given its overlap with concepts like self-regulated learning and motivation, cognitive engagement is sometimes referred to as self-regulatory engagement (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004) or motivational engagement (Wolters, 2004).

Recent scholarship has expanded the concept of engagement by introducing additional dimensions, such as *agentic engagement*, reflecting students' proactive and constructive participation in instructional activities (Reeve & Tseng, 2011), and *social engagement*, highlighting the importance

of social interactions with peers and teachers, whether within classroom tasks (Fredricks et al., 2016) or the broader school environment (Wang, Fredricks, et al., 2019). There is also a growing recognition of the need to distinguish between engagement and disengagement within each dimension (e.g., behavioral engagement *vs.* behavioral disengagement; Jang et al., 2016; Skinner et al., 2009; Wang, Fredricks, et al., 2019; Wong & Liem, 2022). While traditionally seen as opposite ends of the same (unidimensional) continuum, recent evidence suggests that disengagement is not merely the absence of engagement but rather a distinct state characterized by inactivity and withdrawal from school and learning. Various studies support this distinction, demonstrating that engagement and disengagement often emerge as separate factors in factor analyses and follow distinct adaptive and maladaptive pathways, leading to different antecedents and outcomes (Jang et al., 2016).

Multilevel. Student engagement is a multilevel construct embedded within various contexts (Wang & Degol, 2014; Wang & Hofkens, 2020; Wong & Liem, 2022). According to Skinner and Pitzer (2012), engagement can be examined across four levels. At the broadest level, engagement pertains to students' involvement in prosocial institutions, including schools, youth groups, and community organizations. The second level focuses on engagement within the school setting, encompassing both academic and extracurricular activities as well as the broader school community. Nested within this context, the third level examines students' engagement in the classroom, including their interactions with teachers, peers, and the curriculum. The most specific level considers engagement in individual classroom tasks and learning activities, which can be measured across various timescales, from moment-to-moment (e.g., Shernoff et al., 2016; see Symonds and colleagues, this volume), to daily (e.g., Patall et al., 2018), and even over the long term (e.g., Reeve & Tseng, 2011).

Malleable. Student engagement is a malleable construct shaped by the social environment surrounding students. In the school setting, engagement is influenced by factors such as school and cohort sizes (Weiss et al., 2010), school climate (e.g., perceived school safety; Yang et al., 2018), peer relationships (see Wong, this volume), and teacher expectations (see Liem, this volume). Teachers' instructional practices, including provision of autonomy support and academic structure, also play a significant role in shaping engagement (Patall et al., 2018; Stroet et al., 2013; see Jang & Reeve, this volume). Additionally, variations in student engagement can be attributed to differences in home environments and family backgrounds, such as parent-child relationships (see Fredricks, this volume) and family socioeconomic status or SES (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Beyond school and home, engagement is linked to broader sociocultural factors, such as a country's human development index (Santos et al., 2023) and experiences

of ethnic prejudice and discrimination (Civitillo et al., 2024). These findings underscore that student engagement is susceptible to external influences, making it a promising target for interventions (Fredricks et al., 2019).

WHY IS STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

The growing interest in student engagement stems from its recognized role as a key outcome in and of itself and in facilitating other desirable outcomes. Described as “the holy grail of learning” (Sinatra et al., 2015, p. 1), “an individual strength leading to positive youth development and well-being” (Upadaya & Salmela-Aro, 2021, p. 362), or “an antidote to several academic problems found in middle and high school” (Martins et al., 2022, p. 793), student engagement is seen as the outward expression of student motivation (Skinner et al., 2009; Skinner & Raine, 2022) and a reliable predictor of numerous positive outcomes. These outcomes include academic achievement (Reyes et al., 2012), timely graduation (Archambault et al., 2009), sustained motivation (Martin et al., 2017; Putwain et al., 2018), and various aspects of physical, subjective, and psychological well-being (Datu & King, 2018; Steele & Fullagar, 2009). Moreover, engagement plays a protective role by reducing the likelihood of negative outcomes, such as delinquency, substance use, and mental health issues (Li & Lerner, 2011; Yu et al., 2016). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis (Wong et al., 2024) revealed significant positive associations between student engagement and academic achievement ($r = .33$) and subjective well-being ($r = .35$). Notably, behavioral engagement showed the strongest link to academic success, while affective engagement was most closely related to subjective well-being. Given these extensive benefits, many educators and researchers consider student engagement to be a crucial solution to various educational challenges.

Despite (or due to) the benefits of student engagement, many educators are worried about their ability to effectively enhance it. For example, in a series of interviews with 31 mathematics teachers, Skilling et al. (2016) revealed that many of the teachers felt “uncertain about how to engage students” and “powerless in their attempts” (p. 561). Similarly, a recent online survey of over 400 U.S. teachers found that approximately 80% were worried about their students’ engagement in classroom learning (Gradient Learning Poll, 2023). Moreover, 95% of the respondents agreed that supporting teachers in increasing and sustaining student engagement should be a top priority for schools.

Given the importance of student engagement and practitioners’ concerns about fostering it, there has been a growing emphasis on interventions designed to enhance student involvement. The recent publication of the

Handbook of Student Engagement Interventions (Fredricks et al., 2019) underscores a range of strategies, including Tier-1 (universal) interventions for all students, as well as Tier-2 (selective) and Tier-3 (intensive) programs aimed at students at-risk for disengagement. Covering the broad scope of student engagement, the *Handbook* offers interventions that address such key areas as instructional strategies, school bullying prevention, family, mental health, and community building.

Importantly, the *Handbook* also emphasizes the need for adaptability of engagement interventions, particularly considering sociocultural differences in how students learn. For instance, Lam et al. (2016) examined the self-reported engagement of seventh to ninth graders across 12 countries, analyzing how factors, such as perceived social support and the countries' individualism-collectivism and socioeconomic indices, influenced student engagement. Their findings suggest that, while there are generally consistent patterns of engagement across countries, indicating some degree of cultural universality, the connection between parental socioemotional support and engagement is stronger in more collectivist societies.

Dong et al. (2020) gave another example of how cultural responsiveness can be integrated into positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), a tiered intervention model for preventing and addressing school behavior issues. A key PBIS strategy is the use of praise, but Dong et al. noted that a student could exhibit off-task behaviors after receiving verbal praise due to discomfort with individual attention, rooted in their cultural background. In some Latinx and Asian cultures, authoritarian parenting emphasizes respect and obedience while seldom using verbal praise, leading to a mismatch between home and school environments. In such cases, culturally adapted strategies, like collaborating with caregivers and using alternative rewards, such as stickers, may be more effective.

Together, cultural variations underscore the importance of tailoring engagement interventions to fit students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Intervention developers and educators may need to adapt their strategies based on sociocultural and other contextual factors to maximize their effectiveness. As highlighted in Point 6 of the *Multicultural Guidelines Relevant to Understanding and Advancing Student Engagement in Schools Scholarship and Practice* (Jimerson & Chen, 2022),² scholars and educators are encouraged to “develop and promote culturally adaptive supports, interventions, and advocacy within and across systems, including prevention and early intervention, in order to promote understanding and advance student engagement at school” (p. 629). As we will discuss next, this adaptation is particularly important given the growing multiculturalism worldwide and the geo-cultural imbalance in how engagement research has predominantly been conducted.