

Promoting Student Engagement in the Classroom

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Background/Context: Much progress has been made toward a greater understanding of student engagement and its role in promoting a host of desirable outcomes, including academic outcomes such as higher achievement and reduced dropout, as well as various well-being and life outcomes. Nonetheless, disengagement in our schools is widespread. This may be due in part to a lack in the student engagement literature of a broad conceptual framework for understanding how students are engaged at the classroom level, and the ways in which teachers may play an active role in promoting student engagement.

Purpose: The present work seeks to summarize and synthesize the literature on student engagement, providing both a greater appreciation of its importance as well as a context for how it might be better understood at the classroom level. It considers how the primary elements of the classroom environment—the student, the teacher, and the content—interact to affect engagement, and proposes a conceptual framework (based on a previously established model of classroom instruction and learning) for understanding how student engagement may be promoted in the classroom.

Research Design: This study combines a review of the extant research on the structure and correlates of student engagement, with elements of an analytic essay addressing how selected literature on motivation and classroom instruction may be brought to bear on the understanding and promotion of student engagement in the classroom.

Conclusions/Recommendations: This article offers a variety of research-based practical suggestions for how the proposed conceptual model—which focuses on student-teacher relationships, the relevance of the content to the students, and teachers' pedagogical and curricular competence—might be applied in classroom settings.

It is now well understood that students' engagement in school plays a vital role in their academic and, ultimately, life success (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). However, student disengagement in school is widespread. One review of the literature on engagement and motivation finds that between 40% and 60% of high school students are "chronically disengaged" (Klem & Connell, 2004). In their large-scale national survey of middle and high school students, Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations (2013) finds that more than half of 10th-grade students are bored at school, and less than half enjoy being at school. A similar national survey of 14- to 15-year-olds finds that only 3 in 10 girls and 2 in 10 boys were evaluated by their parents to be highly engaged in school (Albert et al., 2005). Such high levels of disengagement have been found in a number of countries around the world (Willms, 2003). Of equal concern, levels of disengagement typically increase as students progress through school (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998); this is true of children in various countries around the world and across a number of different subject areas (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006).

Fortunately, much has been learned in recent years about how to promote engagement in school. This is due in part to a greater conceptual clarity and an emerging consensus around how to define engagement, as well as a wealth of research from varying perspectives (e.g., educational psychology, developmental psychology, sociology of education) that has been brought to bear on the issues of student motivation, academic self-concept, teacher effectiveness, school climate, and the like. The present work seeks to further elucidate the importance of student engagement via a review of the contemporary literature on its structure and correlates, and proposes a model for better understanding how student engagement in the classroom can be fostered based on a previously established framework of instruction and learning in the classroom. While it is our hope that the present work advances theory and research in the field of student engagement, we are primarily animated by a desire to affect teacher practice. With that in mind, our objective is not to explain all possible factors related to, or influences on, student engagement, but to better inform practitioners of education regarding the role they can play in promoting it.

DEFINING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The term *engagement* with reference to school has been conceptualized in myriad (and often inconsistent) ways since its investigation began in earnest in the mid to late 1980s (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Fredricks & McColsky, 2012). Some earlier scholars of engagement focused strictly on behavioral indicators (e.g., Finn, 1989), while others addressed primarily psychological aspects of engagement (e.g., Newmann, 1992). Moreover, terminology has been an issue. Among others, the terms *school engagement* (e.g., Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), *student engagement* (Willms, 2003), *academic engagement* (Libbey, 2004), and *engagement in schoolwork* (National

Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004) have been used to refer to various types and aspects of engagement. In many cases, scholars have used the same term but operationalized it very differently (e.g., school engagement as participation in school activities compared to school engagement as positive feelings about school). We concur with Appleton et al. (2008) in our preference for the term *student engagement*, which allows for a more contextualized understanding that recognizes the important distinctions among students' evaluations and experiences in the various subcontexts of the school ecology.

In an effort to bring some conceptual clarity to the issue, Fredricks et al. (2004) argues that engagement should be viewed as a metaconstruct, comprising three highly interrelated but conceptually distinct dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. *Behavioral engagement* refers to the various learning- and academic-oriented behaviors, actions, and involvements in which students engage in school. Examples of behavioral engagement include participation in school-related activities, attending and contributing to classes, compliance with school rules, and completing assignments, as well as effort put into studying and concentrating on academic tasks. *Cognitive engagement* involves a psychological investment in learning and mastery of academic material; desire for challenge; enacting metacognitive strategies such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's thinking; and self-regulation. *Emotional engagement* refers to students' feelings about their relationships with others in the school environment (e.g., teachers, peers) and the general sense of belonging in the school context that is often derived from such relationships. Additionally, emotional engagement involves students' sense of connectedness to and interest in the academic content, which can be accompanied by a sense of efficacy and confidence regarding their academic ability. This proposed tri-dimensionality has been empirically supported (Wang, Willet, & Eccles, 2011) and is now quite commonly accepted among scholars in the field (see Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; cf. Appleton et al., 2008).

WHY STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IS SO IMPORTANT

Student engagement, in general and across its many conceptualizations, has been found to be predictive of a variety of desirable academic and life outcomes. Specifically, numerous studies have shown that the more students are engaged in their schoolwork, the more likely they are to perform well academically, including getting higher grades in their classes, as well as higher scores on standardized tests (e.g., Finn & Rock, 1997; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; for reviews, see Appleton et al., 2008; J. Fredricks et al., 2004; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004;). Finn (2006) further finds that students who were more engaged in school in eighth grade were more likely to matriculate into and eventually graduate from college, even when controlling for levels of academic achievement in high school. Some scholars have additionally suggested that promoting engagement should be particularly efficacious in shrinking the achievement gap (Lee & Shute, 2009).

Moreover, student engagement has been directly linked to reduced dropout in high school (Finn, 1993; Finn & Rock, 1997). Indeed, according to the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2004), "Dropping out of high school is for many students the last step in a long process through which students become disengaged from school" (p. 24). Dropping out of high school is highly likely to have serious negative long-term consequences, such as difficulty finding employment and reduced quality of life. In a longitudinal sample of two generations of French-speaking Canadian 12- to 16-year-olds, Janosz, LeBlanc, Boulerice, and Tremblay (1997) finds that indicators of all three dimensions of engagement were predictive of school dropout. Interestingly, in a larger longitudinal sample of French-Canadian high school students, Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, and Pagani (2009) finds that only behavioral (not cognitive or emotional) engagement predicted school dropout. However, the authors went on to suggest that behavioral engagement might mediate the relationships between both cognitive and emotional engagement, and school dropout. Such models that propose one type of engagement as mediator of the relations among another type of engagement and desirable student outcomes present fruitful avenues for future exploration.

Beyond these school-related indicators, greater engagement in school has been linked to various indicators of individual well-being. In a sample of middle school students, Antaramian, Huebner, Hills, and Valois (2010) finds that all three types of engagement were positively associated with indicators of subjective well-being (see also Reschly, Huebner, Appleton, & Antaramian, 2008). Based on a sample of middle school students, Suldo et al. (2009) shows that higher emotional engagement in particular (resulting from teacher support) was predictive of greater subjective well-being. In a longitudinal sample of middle school students, Lewis, Huebner, Malone, and Valois (2011) uncovers bidirectional relations between life satisfaction and cognitive engagement—though not behavioral or emotional engagement—controlling for the effects of gender, race, academic achievement, and socioeconomic status. Other studies have further suggested that student engagement can serve as a protective factor against negative indicators of well-being, such as delinquency, substance abuse, and risky sexual behavior (O'Farrell & Morrison, 2003).

Taken together, there is much evidence for the benefits of student engagement toward desirable current and future academic and life outcomes. There are also additional upsides to student engagement. When a classroom is filled with students who are paying attention, focused, participating, mentally stimulated, and having fun, the teacher is much more likely to enjoy being there and, in turn, likely to be more invested (and less likely to burn out). In one school reform effort in England, Covell, McNeil, and Howe (2009) finds that increasing student behavioral engagement led to reduced teacher burnout. Additionally, when engagement is high and disciplinary issues are minimal, more of the teacher's time and effort can be spent on promoting learning, and less on managing distractions. Student engagement thus accrues benefits not only for the students and teachers, but the entire learning environment.

FOCUSING ON STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

To date, most investigations and assessments of student engagement have addressed the degree to which students think, feel, and act engaged in school in general (e.g., Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007; Wang et al., 2011). Some of the indicators that have been used to operationalize student engagement are by definition school-wide, such as the number of school-related activities in which a student participates or questions about the degree to which a student feels like part of the school community. However, the variety of factors that come together to determine the degree to which a student is engaged at any given moment in school is highly contextualized (Furlong et al., 2003; Perry, Turner, & Meyer, 2006). For example, some students are very interested and active in their creative arts classes and cocurricular activities in school, but are utterly bored by math and science; other students come to school early, stay late, and are active in school clubs that engage them in math problems and science experiments. Thus, there is much about the variation in students' experiences of and feelings about their engagement in school that will be poorly understood if only addressed at the school level (Renninger, 2003). In particular, to the extent that many aspects of student engagement are context-specific—such as interest and psychological investment in learning particular content over other content, or a sense of connectedness to a particular teacher but not teachers in general—the structure of most schools that partition the school day into different academic classes and devote each class to a particular subject area is likely to lend itself to an accompanying partitioning of the students' engagement into classroom-level experiences.

This is not to say that student engagement has not been explored at the classroom level. There are many studies that investigate how particular aspects of the classroom environment relate to student engagement (e.g., A. M. Ryan & Patrick, 2001); student engagement in specific subject areas, such as reading at the grammar school level (e.g., Wigfield et al., 2008); and even student engagement by particular subgroups in specific subject areas, such as girls in math and science (e.g., Halpern et al., 2007). Yet such investigations typically attend to the subject area or the subgroup under investigation, not the classroom ecology, and thus generally fall short of providing a broader framework for understanding student engagement in the classroom.

There are, however, some scholars who have called for a more situated, contextual approach to understanding motivation and engagement in schools, often accompanied by a more concerted focus on the classroom. Sivan (1986) notes that the individualistic orientations of many traditional motivational theories belie a depth of understanding that can only be gained by acknowledging that “motivation is a socially negotiated process that results in an observable manifestation of interest and cognitive and affective engagement” (p. 210). Gergen (1985), advocating a social constructivist position, posited that “the explanatory locus of human action” lies not solely in “the interior region of the mind” of individuals, but instead can be found in “the processes and structure of human interaction” (p. 271). Corno and Mandinach (2004) persuasively argues that much of the empirical work in this area has been limited by insufficient attention to the complexities of classroom contexts, as well as methodologies that fail to fully capture what actually happens in the more naturalistic settings of schools and classrooms. Corno et al. (2001) advanced a situated approach to motivation and engagement, emphasizing in particular how instructional environments might affect students' emotional states (such as anxiety level and mood), as well as cognitive processes (such as self-regulation and planning). Krajcik et al. (1998) demonstrates that students may think, feel, and act differently depending on the classroom activities in which they are engaged—in part as a function of personal characteristics such as their personalities, ability levels, and interests; and in part as a function of (and, often, in interaction with) the characteristics of the teacher and classroom (such as the subject matter, teacher personality, and varying instructional approaches and objectives).

Perry et al. (2006) point out that much of the foundational work on motivation and engagement was conducted within the behaviorist and cognitive paradigms, but that “both paradigms have accrued little classroom research to support their basic assumptions or to integrate relationships among contexts and individual differences” (p. 330). They further suggest that while there are important understandings to be gathered from studying variables related to or reflecting student motivation (e.g., goals, expectations), to fully understand how best to promote student engagement it is important to take an ecological perspective, as embraced by social constructivists and socioculturalists. The sociocultural approach, as it applies to educational settings, suggests learning, motivation, and engagement are co-constructed and co-regulated among students and teachers (Hickey, 2003). It addresses the interaction of students and their environments, and how students incorporate their understanding of these contexts into their thoughts and behaviors. From the sociocultural perspective, the fundamental unit of analysis is not a particular element of the classroom (such as the student or the teacher); it is the activity that emerges from the interactions and transactions among the elements. At the same time, this perspective allows for a foregrounding (or backgrounding) of certain elements (including individuals and the cognitive process operating in their minds) when investigating such activity (Rogoff, 1995).

Despite these calls for a more situated, contextualized approach to understanding student engagement—which, we argue, could be advanced by a specific focus on the classroom level, and greater attention to the interactions between students and the various elements of the classroom ecology—more robust conceptual frameworks addressing these have been underdeveloped. This has been a glaring limitation of the literature, as such a model would be of great utility both to scholars who seek to better understand student engagement, and to teachers—independent of the subject area(s) in which they teach. According to Furlong et al. (2003), “Classrooms and the manner in which they function are at the core of student's [*sic*] academic engagement” (p. 106). To the extent that this is the case, an integrative framework for understanding the underpinnings of student engagement in the classroom is much needed.

BUILDING ON THE INSTRUCTIONAL CORE

To understand the factors that underlie and influence student engagement—indeed, any student-related psychosocial phenomenon—in the classroom, we must first consider the primary elements of the classroom ecology. City, Elmore, Fiarman, and Teitel (2009) proposes a model that they call the *instructional core*, based on a framework first

proposed by Cohen and Ball (1999), which succinctly describes these elements. According to City et al. (2009), the instructional core comprises teacher, student, and content, and the relationships among them. Focusing on instruction and learning, these authors propose that each element is inextricably intertwined with the other two, and that together the elements determine the nature of instructional practice. These same three components of the classroom—student, teacher, and academic content—represent the primary foci of assessment in the Measures of Effective Teaching project (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012), which similarly seeks to understand the teacher practices that promote student learning. While the instructional core model guides us toward the elements of the classroom to which we should attend, to date it has only been employed as a framework for understanding and improving teaching and learning in the classroom; it has not, as yet, been considered in the context of student engagement.

STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

Implicit in City et al.'s (2009) instructional core model is the notion that student learning in the classroom is a function of the interaction of a variety of forces simultaneously acting on and emanating from that student: intra-individual (within student), inter-individual (between student and others in the classroom), and academic (between student and content, in part as mediated by and co-constructed with the teacher). These factors also function prominently in the degree to which a given student is engaged in a given class.

Intra-individual factors include those that reside primarily within the student. These include personality dispositions that are likely to transcend subject area, such as an orientation toward learning, orientation toward the future, self-concept and sense of confidence, ability to self-regulate, persistence and willingness to be challenged, sociability, and conscientiousness. At the same time, these relatively stable characteristics that students bring with them into the classroom—independent of subject area, teacher, and other students in the class—will manifest themselves in reaction to the subject area, teacher, and other students in the class (Krajcik et al., 1998). That is, students may be predisposed (and thus more likely) to think, feel, and act in typical ways across settings in accordance with their personalities and individual characteristics—which does suggest an important level of utility in better understanding such dispositions and traits—but the degree to which they *actually* think, feel, and act in a given setting will vary based on what and whom they encounter in that particular setting. It is for this reason—following the work of Eccles et al. (1993) and mindful of the ecological bases of the situated, social constructionist, and sociocultural models—that we will focus most of our attention on the interactions of person and environment, as described below.

Inter-individual factors comprise the student in the context of the social elements of the classroom, namely the relationship between the student and the teacher, and relationships among the student and his or her fellow students in the class. Specifically, a given student's classroom engagement is likely to be influenced by his or her relationship with the teacher (i.e., whether the student feels supported, respected, and inspired by the teacher); his or her relationships with the other students in the classroom (i.e., whether the student feels supported, respected, and accepted by his or her peers, as well as the degree to which the student feels he or she is academically competent relative to the other students in the class in that particular subject area); and how the aggregate of relationships among the other students with each other and the teacher contribute more generally to a positive classroom learning environment (i.e., one marked by respect between teacher and students and among students; one that is mutually supportive and team-oriented; and one that is free of distraction, especially regarding disciplinary issues). Certainly, there are other potential inter-individual factors that originate outside of the classroom that can play a part in a student's engagement in a particular class (e.g., the degree of perceived parental support or pressure for the student to perform well in that class and/or school in general), but as the nature of the present work is geared toward informing educators, our focus is on entities that are actually present in the classroom and amenable to teacher influence.

By *academic factors*, we mean specifically the subject area and the content being covered in that class. Especially as students progress further into their schooling, they will attribute different levels of value to each of their classes, based on a multitude of factors such as relevance of the material and their academic self-concept in that subject area. We suggest there are three types of relevance of class material, following from Eccles et al.'s (1983) expectancy-value theory. According to this theory, expectancies (one's beliefs about one's ability to perform on a given task or activity) and values (the underlying reasons for engaging in that task or activity) motivate one's choices and actions with regard to that task or activity. With a primary focus on the values component of this theory, the first type of relevance of class material is that it has relevance to one's current interests (which aligns with Eccles et al.'s *interest value*, which is also sometimes called *intrinsic value*). The second is that the subject area is perceived as important to one's future goals (which aligns with Eccles et al.'s *utility value*). The third is that the subject area is perceived as relevant to one's identity (which aligns with Eccles et al.'s *attainment value*). There is rich research literature showing that in the absence of valuing the class material, student engagement is diminished (e.g., Legault, Green-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006; see Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, for a review).

Importantly, class material is also likely to affect student engagement through one's perceived competence and self-efficacy in the subject area and the degree to which that class is central to one's academic self-concept. In a sample of high school students, Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, and Hall (2003) finds that perceptions of competence were predictive of both student engagement and academic achievement. Across numerous studies, and with samples of students from a number of different countries, Marsh and his colleagues (e.g., Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, & Baumert, 2005; Marsh & Yeung, 1997) have found that when academic self-concept (i.e., the degree to which students feel the class material reflects who they are and what they are good at) is high in a particular subject area, it leads to greater interest and engagement in coursework in that subject area, which in turn leads to higher levels of achievement in that subject area.

In further relation to Eccles et al.'s (1983) expectancy-value theory, if interest, perceived importance, self-efficacy, and/or academic self-concept are low in a given subject area, students may see their participation and efforts in that class as reflecting a *cost value*. In their model, "cost" refers to the ways in which engaging in a particular school activity (such as a class) inhibits one's engagement in other, more preferred activities/classes, as well as the degree of emotional cost one may incur through engagement in that activity/class (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). In particular, when students are in a class in which they do not feel efficacious and their academic self-concept is low, they are likely to feel less invested in and more anxious about their performance. These factors may be related to the psychological phenomenon known as *stereotype threat*, in which members of a group of students who share a salient characteristic (such as race or gender) fear that they might confirm a negative stereotype about their group (such as perceptions that girls perform worse than boys in math and science), which increases their performance anxiety and subsequently decreases their actual performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Stereotype threat can affect students' self-efficacy and academic self-concept in a given subject area (or school in general), which can in turn lead to decreased value and interest in that subject area (or school in general). The ultimate result can be disengagement from further coursework in that subject area or, when experienced more broadly, school in general (Kurtz-Costes, Rowley, Harris-Britt, & Woods, 2008).

As with many of the concepts related to engagement, the relations among many of these academic factors and engagement are bidirectional. Teachers may, for example, attempt to make the material more engaging for the students who are in their classes by showing how it is connected to students' interests and/or important for their futures, but (especially at the high school level) students may choose their classes and thus select (or not select) those in which they do (or do not) already hold an interest or see as personally important.

Beyond these intrapersonal, interpersonal, and academic factors, it should be noted that there are a number of demographic and other external factors that have been found to be associated with student engagement and may have some impact on engagement in the classroom (e.g., gender, race; see National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). For example, girls have been found to be, on average, somewhat more engaged than boys in school in general (e.g., Albert et al., 2005), but less so in mathematics classes (e.g., Eccles, 1994). In a national sample of American high school students, Yazzie-Mintz (2010) finds that all three types of engagement in school in general were reported as lower for males, ethnic groups other than White or Asian, students in special education classes, and students from families with lower socioeconomic status. McInerney, Hinkley, Dowson, and Van Etten (1998) finds cultural differences between Anglo, immigrant, and Aboriginal Australians in levels of some indicators of cognitive engagement. Other external factors, such as parental support and school structural variables (e.g., smaller class sizes), have further been found to be associated with student engagement (e.g., McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Wigfield et al., 2006).

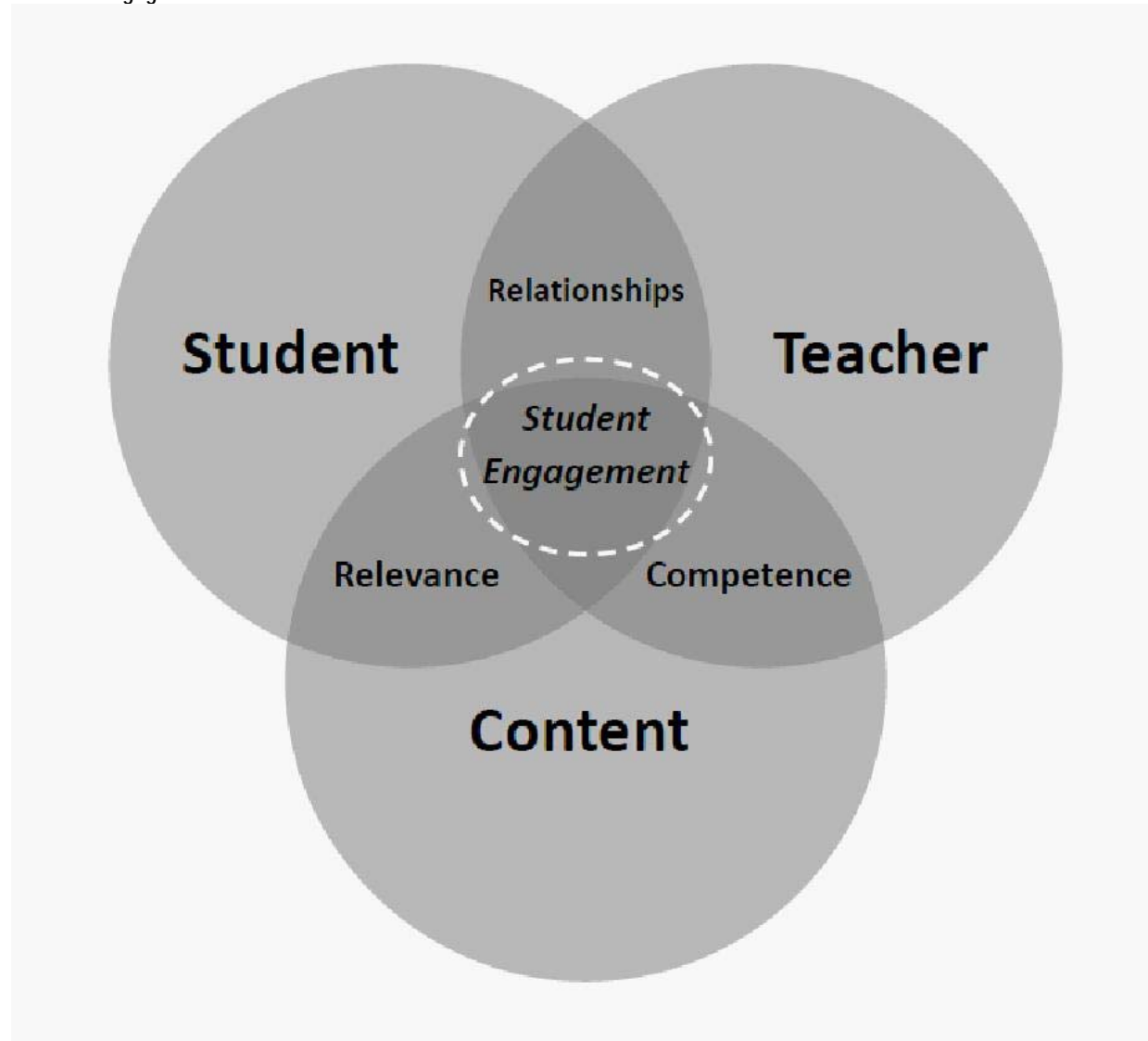
While the influence of these external variables may play an important part in understanding student engagement, we believe it is more propitious to focus on the intra-individual, inter-individual, and academic aspects of the classroom for two primary reasons. First, external factors typically do not explain a great deal of the variance in student engagement at the classroom level, and many studies controlling for them demonstrate effects that are above and beyond their influence (e.g., Wang & Holcombe, 2010). For example, in the aforementioned McInerney et al. (1998) investigation showing cultural differences in Australian students, cognitive engagement was nonetheless positively associated with achievement for all cultural groups. Second, the intra-individual, inter-individual, and academic aspects of the classroom are accessible to educators and malleable in ways that other conditions may not be, making them of particular importance to educators and ripe for targeting as mechanisms for improving engagement (Perry et al., 2006). The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2004) concludes that schools can play an important role in mitigating the effects of demographic and social factors such as gender, race, low socioeconomic status, and reduced parental support; similarly, Appleton et al. (2008) advocates a "move beyond the focus on more intractable characteristics of students (e.g., race/ethnicity, home language, family income) in favor of predicting outcomes based on [factors] more amenable to educator change efforts" (p. 374).

THE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT CORE MODEL

These intra-individual, inter-individual, and academic components are part and parcel of the three functional elements of City et al.'s (2009) instructional core: the students, the teacher, and the content. An individual student comprises the intra-individual domain—this includes all of the characteristics (dispositions, interests, hopes, fears, goals, goal orientations, etc.) that the student brings to the class with him or her. It is this domain that the motivational literature from the behavioral and cognitive perspectives typically addresses. Students' interactions with the teacher (and with each other) comprise the inter-individual domain—this domain primarily considers the myriad ways in which students (and all of the intra-individual characteristics they bring with them) interact with teachers (and all of the intra-individual characteristics they bring with them, including their expectations, instructional approach, etc.). The ecological approaches noted earlier place particular emphasis on the importance of these interactions to student engagement. The curricular content—and the way in which it is initially delivered by the teacher and then adapted, altered, and its meaning co-constructed with the students—comprises the academic domain. With these elements in mind, we propose a framework for understanding how they combine to enhance (or inhibit) student engagement in the classroom, which we call the Student Engagement Core (SEC) model (see Figure 1; see also Corso, Bundick, Quaglia, & Haywood, 2013). At the heart of the SEC model are the *interactions* among the three functional elements, which can be visually represented by the intersections among them on a Venn diagram. There are four basic intersections: student-teacher, student-content, teacher-content, and (at the center) student-teacher-content. We will now describe these intersections, which we call *core interactions*, and highlight evidence from the research literature for how each promotes student engagement. It is not our objective to provide an exhaustive review of

this literature, but rather to reflect through the selected works what the preponderance of the evidence supports.

Figure 1. The Student Engagement Core model, describing the core interactions between the three classroom elements (student, teacher, and content) that promote student engagement



STUDENT-TEACHER (RELATIONSHIPS)

The interaction between students and teachers in the classroom is apparent in student-teacher relationships. The degree to which these relationships are likely to be conducive to a student's engagement rests upon the student's perception that the teacher is supportive, invested, caring, fair, and respectful. There is much literature to substantiate the benefits of positive student-teacher relationships toward all three types of student engagement (see Davis, 2003, for a review). Using data from the large-scale National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health in the United States, Crosnoe, Johnson, and Elder (2004) finds student-teacher relationships to be associated with

behavioral engagement at the high school level. Hughes, Luo, Kwok, and Loyd (2008) shows in a sample of grammar school students that the quality of teacher-student relationships in reading and math classes leads to behavioral engagement in those classes, which in turn leads to higher achievement in math and reading. Furrer and Skinner (2003) finds that students in Grades 3-6 who reported a strong sense of relatedness to their teachers were more likely to be both behaviorally and emotionally engaged in school. In a study of students in a similar age range, Wentzel (1998) demonstrated positive relations between teacher support and both emotional and cognitive engagement.

The role of relationships between students and teachers in promoting engagement is not solely defined by the degree to which teachers support (or are perceived to support) students. Reeve and Tseng (2011) argue that an underappreciated aspect of this dimension involves its bidirectional nature; not only do the engagement benefits of such positive relationships flow from teachers to students, but the students' engagement can in turn affect their teachers' subsequent instructional and motivational behaviors (see also Skinner & Belmont, 1993). For example, it is sometimes the case that when students appear disinterested or unwilling to participate in class discussion, their teachers may (consciously or unconsciously) respond by reducing their attention to and support for them, and/or attempting to exert greater control over them (Pelletier, Seguin-Levesque, & Legault, 2002). There is thus likely to be a feedback loop in the interplay between student-teacher relationships and student engagement.

STUDENT-CONTENT (RELEVANCE)

At the intersection of the student element and the content element in the classroom lies each student's implicit or explicit assessment of the relevance of the content to him or her personally. Generally speaking, the more relevant students perceive the content of a class to be, the more likely they are to be engaged by it (Frymier & Shulman, 1995). More specifically, we proposed earlier (following from Eccles et al.'s [1983] expectancy-value theory) that there are three primary ways in which the content of a class may be relevant to students: relevance to one's current interests, relevance to one's future goals, and relevance to one's identity or sense of self. There is much evidence for the importance of each form of relevance to student engagement.

Relevance to One's Current Interests

This type of relevance includes how the content connects to other subjects as well as current events, and how it applies to students' everyday lives. Keller (1987) suggested that linking the content of a class to experiences and ideas to which students can relate will increase perceptions of relevance, which in turn is likely to lead to greater intrinsic motivation to engage (especially behaviorally and cognitively) with that content. However, while meaningful and motivating, these types of connections may only pique one's curiosity or grab one's attention in a way that is likely to be transitory, reflecting what have been called *situational interests*; they are not likely to be as engaging as *individual interests*, which are more stable over time and more commonly connected to one's future goals (Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

Relevance to One's Future Goals

This type of relevance suggests alignment between the investment one makes in the class and the anticipated future payoff of that investment. It is likely to reflect the more stable, individual interests rather than situational interests. As noted earlier, this type of relevance closely mirrors Eccles et al.'s (1983) notion of utility value, which is also very similar to the notion of instrumental value (see, e.g., Simons, Dewitte, & Lens, 2000). Research on both utility and instrumental values has found them to be related to various indicators of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement (see Wigfield & Cambria, 2010 for a review), and relevant for students as young as elementary age (though future utility and current importance may not be easily differentiated for children in these early years; Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993). This type of relevance incorporates the notion of future time perspective, which refers to one's ability to connect one's current efforts to longer-term goals (see Kauffman & Husman, 2004). Eccles and Wigfield (2002) highlighted the centrality of a future time perspective in the process through which utility value leads to student engagement. Notably, this type of relevance suggests that even when particular content is not intrinsically interesting to a student (i.e., low in interest value), it can be engaging to the extent that it is perceived as otherwise important (Jang, 2008). It should also be noted that content relevant to one's current interests that are more situational in nature may evolve into more long-term individual interests, especially when they are found to align with one's developing identity (Renninger, 2003; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Relevance to One's Identity

Sfard and Prusak (2005) suggest that identity provides a "missing link" between students' motivation to learn and the instructional context in which that learning takes place. Relevance to one's identity incorporates how the content of the class is perceived by the student to reflect some aspect of his or her self-concept, specifically academic self-concept (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). Academic self-concept is partitioned into different subject areas, suggesting that students perceive varying degrees to which the content covered in their classes reflects who they are and what they are good at. The higher students' academic self-concept in a particular subject area, the more likely they are to engage in it—and, in turn, achieve in it (Marsh & Craven, 2006). The formation of academic self-concept, and the role of identity in motivation and engagement more broadly, involves a highly complex and varied set of processes that integrate gender identity, ethnic identity, myriad cultural factors, etc., which are beyond the scope of the present work (see Wigfield et al., 2006).

When taken together, the notions of relevance to one's identity and relevance to one's future goals align with theories of self-concordance (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999) and integrated regulation (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2009), which suggest that when students' goal commitments reflect their sense of self and core values, they are more likely to behaviorally engage in these goals (and, ultimately, enjoy the benefits of attaining them, along with the increased psychological well-being that usually accompanies goal attainment).

TEACHER-CONTENT (COMPETENCE)

The interaction between a teacher and class content involves, in large part, the degree to which the teacher has competence in the subject area. However, competence regarding content alone is unlikely to lead directly to student engagement—a teacher must also have the pedagogical and social skills to deliver content knowledge competently. In this way, competence refers more broadly to the teacher's effectiveness in facilitating learning about the class material. Stipek (2002) finds in her study of elementary school students that the quality of instruction predicted higher behavioral and emotional engagement in the classroom. Klem and Connell (2004) revealed in a diverse sample of primary and secondary school students that those who perceive their teachers as caring, their learning environments as well-structured, and their school's expectations as high, are more likely to report behavioral and cognitive engagement in school. Similarly, in a sample of fourth- to sixth-grade students, Blumenfeld and Meece (1988) showed that, in science classes where teachers held high expectations for their students and pushed them to succeed, students were more likely to be cognitively engaged. In their ethnographic study of at-risk students in a culturally diverse array of 14 secondary schools, Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, and Fernandez (1989) present in-depth accounts of how instruction marked by involving students in meaningful tasks with real-world implications, sharing knowledge with each other, and high levels of contact between adults in the school and the students leads to higher cognitive and emotional engagement.

Moreover, it is likely that when teachers exhibit competence in both their subject area and their craft, they will be more likely to earn the respect of the students. When students respect their teachers, and teachers foster a classroom environment marked by mutual respect, students are more likely to be generally engaged in their classes (A. M. Ryan & Patrick, 2001).

STUDENT-TEACHER-CONTENT

According to the SEC model, student engagement is highly likely to arise in classrooms where student-teacher relationships are strong, students perceive the class content to be relevant, and they perceive the teacher to be an expert in the content and effective in delivering it. Moreover, the presence of these core interactions is likely to be additive toward increased student engagement; that is, not only is the presence of each of these interactions beneficial, but there is likely to be added benefit above the contribution of each interaction when two or all three are in place (in statistical terms, unique variance explained for each core interaction in the presence of the other two). Though few have studied this directly, some evidence for this contention can be found in the literature. For example, V. E. Lee and Smith (1999) conducted a large-scale study of middle school students investigating student perceptions of adult support in reading and mathematics classes. They found that while students' perceptions of teachers' (along with other students' and adults') support modestly predicted achievement in those subject areas, achievement was significantly stronger for those students who both perceived such support *and* felt that their teachers challenged them to achieve academically in those classes. Taken together, these results suggest that while perceived teacher support is potentially beneficial toward student achievement, perceived teacher support accompanied by perceived teacher competence are even more likely to promote student achievement.

It should also be noted that at this intersection of the three core interactions, it may be difficult to cleanly separate one interaction from another; indeed, there is some degree of inherent overlap among them. For example, teacher competence by definition involves teachers' social competence in the classroom, one aspect of which incorporates their ability and understanding of how to connect with students (which involves a variety of teacher capacities such as one's ability to adapt one's demeanor and responsiveness to a given situation; understanding of and sensitivity to students' needs, interests, and diverse backgrounds; and willingness to accommodate those needs, interests, and backgrounds in one's instructional approach). Thus, student-teacher relationships are highly likely to be directly impacted by teacher competence.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: APPLYING THE SEC MODEL

In this section, we offer suggestions derived from the literature for promoting student engagement in the classroom. The list is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to highlight examples of practices that are both specific and validated by research to be effective (for a comprehensive treatment, see Christenson et al., 2008). We organize these suggestions based on the core interactions of the SEC model.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ENHANCING STUDENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

As noted earlier, positive student-teacher relationships are grounded in students' perceptions that their teachers care about them, communicate well with them, and provide instrumental/academic and emotional support to them (see Pianta, 1999, for a review). Such guidance may be helpful on a general level, but if such research is going to affect

practice it is important that specific suggestions and guidelines are offered.

Showing that one cares can take many forms, and what exactly that looks like will differ by person and situation. Regardless of form, according to Perry et al. (2006), “instructional relationships may be one of the strongest sources of students’ interpretations of their relationship with their teachers. It may be the primary way that teachers demonstrate their caring to students” (p. 343). From this standpoint, teachers show students they care in large part by taking their profession seriously, and by interacting with students as though they are there to learn as much as the teachers are there to teach. Of course, there are numerous other ways that teachers can show they care. For example, Wentzel’s (1997, 1998) work suggests that students perceive their teachers as caring when the teachers not only talk to them, but also listen to them and ask if they need help (and provide help when needed); when they are mindful of perceptions of fairness; and when they take the time to explain potentially confusing subject matter. Forgetting students’ names, on the other hand, is a telltale sign of a teacher not caring.

Many scholars have suggested that one of the foundations of positive student-teacher relationships is mutual respect (Griffiths et al., 2012; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). Classrooms that are marked by mutual respect between students and teachers are perceived to be more supportive of the students’ success and promote students’ behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement (Patrick, Ryan, & Kaplan, 2007; A. M. Ryan & Patrick, 2001). Aside from showing respect in the typical ways (such as expressing appreciation and praise, and not embarrassing or demeaning students in front of the class; Murdock, Hale, & Weber, 2001), one way in which teachers can make students feel respected is by inviting them to provide feedback on their teaching and suggestions for classroom improvement (Davidson & Phelan, 1999; Mitra, 2004). Another is to show their interest in the students’ lives outside of the classroom (and integrate that knowledge into their instructional practice, as noted in the section to follow). These approaches of integrating and honoring students’ voices and getting to know students, along with providing flexibility to meet students’ needs and even allowing them to have input into teachers’ instructional practice, are characteristic of a more general approach to teaching known as the *student-centered approach*, which has been shown to strengthen student-teacher relationships (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

Another underappreciated mechanism by which student-teacher relationships can be fostered is through the selective use of humor. Integrating humor has been found to help teachers build rapport and hold students’ attention (Davis, 2006). However, it must be used appropriately—when teachers use humor at inappropriate times or in inappropriate ways, it may lead students to lose respect or not take the teacher seriously.

SUGGESTIONS FOR ENHANCING CONTENT RELEVANCE

Class content can be made relevant to the students in a variety of ways. In many situations, especially those in which teachers may not know (or are perceived as not knowing) much about the students’ lives outside of the classroom, it is important that they start by asking *authentic questions* (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). That is, they inquire about and express genuine interest in learning more about students’ life experiences, skills, interests, and goals. This knowledge can then be used to help contextualize students’ learning and differentiate instruction.

While we acknowledge it may be easier said than done—especially in an educational climate marked by numerous curricular and testing constraints—learning more about and integrating into the classroom students’ individual experiences, interests, and goals need not be seen as strictly in the seemingly magical purview of the über-teacher. For example, motivational research provides some general guidance for promoting students’ situational interest in class material in a way that often does not add significant instructional time or effort. Among others, the work of Malone and Lepper (1987) suggests that teachers can boost students’ situational interest and intrinsic motivation to learn the class material when they integrate fantasy elements (e.g., embellish in-class activities in such ways that introduce playfulness and allow for identification with fictional characters) and introduce novelty and diversity into the curriculum (which stimulates curiosity). Examples of how novelty and diversity can be brought into the classroom include injecting humor (Davis, 2006); using interactive and visually appealing elements, via various emerging technologies, for example (Mayer, 2009); and employing a variety of innovative instructional and pedagogical approaches (such as simulated frog dissection in science classes and collaborative student research in social studies classes; see, e.g., Fullan, 2011).

Malone and Lepper’s (1987) work also demonstrates the importance of offering students choices in their activities and learning which activities encourage them to experience autonomy, thereby enabling students to connect what they are learning to their interests and goals. Allowing for such choice in the classroom has been found to be related to higher intrinsic motivation, engagement, sense of competence, and academic achievement (Patall, Cooper, & Wynn, 2010). Choice may be particularly beneficial for boosting the behavioral engagement of students who exhibit problem behaviors (Morgan, 2006). Notably, teacher training can be efficacious toward developing the pedagogical skills and strategies that enable choice (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004).

Providing students opportunities for choice need not be in conflict with covering a standards-based curriculum; the practice might instead be viewed as a different means to the same end. Some practical examples of how this can be accomplished are found in Flowerday and Schraw’s (2000) study of K-12 teachers’ beliefs about instructional choice. One teacher in this study reported allowing her students to select from a menu of readings (all in line with content standards) rather than predetermining the specific readings herself. Some teachers permitted their students to determine the format of assessment for certain lessons (e.g., essay test, multiple-choice exam, or book report). Others

provided choice regarding procedural matters, such as when tests are scheduled and assignments are due. The teachers in this study also noted that choice works better in some circumstances than in others. For example, the students' age was an important consideration: younger students should be given more choice in what to do, while older students should be given more choices regarding how to do it; also, older students generally benefitted from choice more than younger students (though students of all ages still benefitted). While allowing more choice in the classroom may entail more work for teachers, that can be counterbalanced by implementing cooperative teaching strategies that allow for parallel instruction and homework sharing (Patail et al., 2010).

Choice can further be integrated with inquiry-based instructional approaches to enhance the relevance of classroom material. Thomas (2000) suggested that effective project-based learning approaches involve students choosing their projects and taking responsibility for designing and managing their work. Furthermore, teachers should guide project selection in order to ensure the projects are authentic, representing real-world problems about which the students feel interested and invested. Similarly, problem-based learning approaches, in which students learn via teacher-facilitated problem solving, are most effective when they are connected to students' life experiences (Hmelo-Silver, 2004).

There are additional approaches through which inquiry-based instruction can enhance content relevance. Brophy (2008) describes specific ways in which teachers can help students develop an appreciation for the value of curricular content. He notes that it is relatively easy to interest students in topics that have a spontaneous emotional appeal and straightforward application to their lives; it is, however, more difficult to convey the value of topics that require deeper consideration in terms of their meaning, aesthetic or cultural value, opportunity for building connections and insight, and so on. The three specific steps Brophy suggests for teachers to engender such appreciation of content include (a) making wise choices about developing curricula that the students will perceive as worth learning; (b) introducing lessons by explaining up front why they are important and what skills they are intended to develop; and (c) engaging students in activities that induce their own discovery of the value of the material, accompanied by a scaffolding of their engagement to help them notice and appreciate this value. He further describes an example of how two social studies teachers have applied these steps to teaching lessons on government (which, he notes, is often perceived by students as a dry, abstract, and boring topic). After developing their lesson plans with these principles in mind, the teachers began their lessons with an explanation of some of the essential functions of government that affect all citizens, such as national defense, transportation infrastructure, and education. One of the teachers prepared a photo essay of a day in the life of a typical student, illustrating how local, state, or the federal government plays a role in various aspects of the day (such as eating eggs for breakfast that were inspected by a government agency, and riding a government-provided bus on government-maintained roads to a government-funded school). In their class discussions, they contrasted the American system of representative democracy with other forms of government by having students simulate aspects of the different forms (such as their voting procedures and what happens when citizens protest). One of the teachers demonstrated how taxes are collected and used by sharing with the class some of her own utility bills, sales receipts, and other tax-related documents. Both teachers advocated for the benefits of actively engaging their students in some form of citizenship, such as writing a letter to their local representative on a matter of importance to them and participating in service learning.

Beyond these examples, in our own experience we have found that, especially in the STEM-related disciplines, teachers can take inquiry-based approaches to instruction that solicit students' out-of-class individual interests and use them as a vehicle for demonstrating class-related competencies. For example, students in a high school physics class may be required to engage in a capstone project, applying the tenets of the class to an out-of-class interest (say, the laws of motion and trajectories to shooting a basketball) of their own choosing, facilitated by the teacher. Even gestures as simple as allowing class time early in the term for each student to share with the class his or her career goals—followed by the teacher fashioning project- and problem-based lessons in ways that are relevant to these various careers—can both boost the students' perceived relevance of the course, and signal to the students the teacher's investment in their personal success (thereby enhancing student-teacher relationships as well).

IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPING TEACHER COMPETENCE

While it is not our intention to review the wealth of literature on building teacher competence in all its forms, we do highlight a few of the teaching strategies and characteristics on which teacher development and training may want to focus in order to maximize the likelihood of equipping teachers with the skills and dispositions to fully engage their students. Moreover, we recognize that in many ways, the aspects of teacher competence that outstrip expertise in class content overlap significantly with those addressed in the previous sections addressing student-teacher relationships and student-content relevance. That is, many of the attributes of competent teaching involve the social skills necessary to connect with students, and the pedagogical skills necessary to help students see the relevance and importance of the material to their lives, interests, and future goals.

A review of the literature by Griffiths et al. (2012) finds that engagement in the classroom was enhanced when teachers integrated instructional strategies that engender an environment characterized by mutual respect and promote cooperation over competition. Kelly and Turner (2009) further advocates a focus on cooperation over competition with low-achieving students in particular, and concludes that classroom activity structure (i.e., whether teachers use whole-class instruction versus small-group or individualized modes of instruction) has little bearing on low-achieving students' engagement when cooperation is emphasized. Moreover, many studies conducted from the expectancy-value perspective (Eccles et al., 1983) have confirmed the importance of teachers having high expectations for the success of their students and incorporating a moderate degree of challenge into class assignments and activities (which further reflects respect for students as learners, which as noted earlier can promote student-teacher

relationships; Yowell, 1999).

One of the most powerful and enduring concepts from the sociocultural perspective suggests that students can be pushed for optimal learning and engagement when the material and teacher support are properly scaffolded (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Some examples of scaffolding include providing direct constructive feedback to students aimed at helping them improve; exhibiting positive affect when instructing; providing clear communication of expectations; and prompting students to explain and justify their understanding of concepts (i.e., “pressing for understanding,” Blumenfeld, 1992).

Additionally, it can be beneficial for teachers to understand and attempt to incorporate into their classrooms a variety of new technologies that can enhance students’ engagement. Corno and Mandinach (2004) suggest the following four technologies might be leveraged: (a) educational computer games, (b) technological innovations designed to improve classroom teaching and learning (such as interactive whiteboards), (c) computer applications developed specifically for promoting motivation and self-regulation, and (d) in-class (and out-of-class) use of the Internet. Emerging technologies, such as smartphones and tablets—along with emerging applications of these technologies—might further be incorporated into the learning process, when properly considered. It should also be noted that not all approaches to technology integration will be equally effective, and the use of more technology does not necessarily lead to greater engagement (or learning). Mayer (2009) provides a comprehensive list of practical guidelines for effective use of technology in the classroom based on considerable experimental evidence, including suggestions for reducing cognitive distractions (which may undermine cognitive engagement) and principles for designing instructional technologies that optimize attention (i.e., behavioral engagement) and deep learning (such as presenting material using animation and narration simultaneously).

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT CORE MODEL

The core interactions illustrated by the SEC model represent the major forces that act on students in the classroom, but they are certainly not the only ones. The model does not specifically address student interactions with other students, and perceived support from peers in the classroom has been found to have a variety of benefits toward student engagement (Wentzel, 1998). Additionally, it is not uncommon that students, while physically present in class, are mentally absent for reasons external to the teacher or the content; perhaps they are more focused on an extracurricular activity that they are anticipating later in the day, or are seniors in the last week of school before graduation. It is also the case that many students suffer from psychological or physical disorders (e.g., attention deficit disorder, insomnia, a chronic health problem, drug or alcohol abuse, undernourishment) that may severely compromise their abilities to engage in class.

While it is true, to a degree, that accommodating the array of learning and behavioral problems individual students might have may be more within the domain of expertise of a specialist (such as a school psychologist or social worker), we (among others, such as Rose & Meyer, 2002) believe schools must strive to engage all students, regardless of ability level, and that the responsibility for engaging them is shared among all teachers, staff, and administrators in a school. Thus, while perhaps introducing greater challenge, having students with such difficulties in one’s class does not excuse a teacher from attempting to engage them to the fullest extent possible. Various models of universal design in the classroom (e.g., Universal Instructional Design, Universal Design for Learning) outline the tenets of an approach that provides multiple means of engendering student engagement and classroom participation. The approach is designed to be inclusive of all students, independent of ability level (see McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2006, for a review). Notably, many of the principles of these universal design models overlap with those of the SEC model, such as making learning relevant and building communities of learners based on positive interactions between students and teachers.

While we have argued for the importance of understanding engagement in a more contextualized, classroom-centric way, it nonetheless remains important to consider students’ engagement in school in general. Indeed, for most students the whole of general school engagement is likely to be more than the sum of its classroom engagement parts. For example, students who are involved in a variety of cocurricular activities are likely to report levels of behavioral engagement in school in general that are higher than would be indicated by an aggregate of their classroom behavioral engagement. Conversely, students who connect well with their teachers and are highly emotionally engaged in their classes, but who have difficulty fitting in with their peers in the school’s broader social environment, are likely to say their emotional engagement in school in general is lower than might be suggested by an aggregate of their classroom emotional engagement. In our review of the literature, we encountered examples of how constructs similar to engagement have been investigated and assessed simultaneously—and have shown differential effects on various outcomes—at the classroom and school levels (e.g., Hoglund & Leadbeater, 2004). Importantly, however, we found no studies that specifically addressed how students’ experiences of engagement in particular classes differ from (or contribute to) their overall sense of engagement in school. Our present focus on student engagement in the classroom has been primarily geared toward informing teachers, who have a good deal of control over the structure and functioning of that localized learning environment, and thus are well-positioned to facilitate the conditions that promote engagement. Broader experiences of students’ engagement in the school may be the purview of school principals and other administrators, along with the collective staff in a school. Future research connecting students’ experiences of classroom-level engagement to their broader levels of school engagement would thus likely inform the development of practices and policies that improve all forms of engagement.

NEXT STEPS

The SEC model provides a basis for future empirical investigation of how student-teacher relationships, student-content relevance, and teacher-content competence combine to produce student engagement in the classroom. Each of these core interactions has been demonstrated in previous research to enhance student engagement, but no study has yet investigated them simultaneously in the classroom setting. Such a study would be beneficial toward understanding to what extent, how best, and under what circumstances the three core interactions contribute to student engagement; however, there would be inherent challenges. Each of the constructs involved has been operationalized in previous research in various ways; for example, there are myriad measures of student engagement without yet a consensus regarding which to use under what conditions (Fredricks & McColsky, 2012). Teacher competence involves numerous dimensions, and likely can only be fully operationalized via a mixed-method approach that involves student perception surveys, teacher assessments such as self-report survey and/or journals, and classroom observations (e.g., Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012). We strongly advocate for the use of such mixed-method approaches over the typical single-method approaches when investigating the various dimensions and complex processes of classroom engagement. Further attention should also be paid to how these factors may operate differently as a function of a multitude of other relevant student, teacher, classroom- and school-level characteristics such as grade level, subject matter, student diversity, socioeconomic status, and teacher characteristics, to name a few.

Despite these challenges, such an investigation—taking into account as many of these factors as possible—is vital. Student engagement is not only desirable in itself, and not only does it predict various desirable outcomes—including higher academic achievement and reduced dropout—but recent evidence suggests that it may even fully mediate the path from motivation to achievement (Reeve, 2012). Though many scholars use the terms motivation and engagement interchangeably, it is important to acknowledge the distinction between them. According to Reeve (2012), “motivation is a private, unobservable psychological, neural, and biological process that serves as an antecedent cause to the publically observable behavior that is engagement” (p. 151). While motivation and engagement are strongly (and bidirectionally) related, motivation can exist independent of engagement. For example, at the beginning of a term, a given student may be motivated to take a drawing and painting elective course because she thinks it will be intrinsically interesting (one source of motivation). However, as the term progresses, despite her continuing high interest and affective enjoyment while engaging in drawing and painting, she fails to invest the time necessary to complete the assignments (forms of behavioral and emotional engagement). As a result, she fails to learn and demonstrate the necessary competencies, and earns a poor grade in the class. Thus, for as much (deserved) attention that has been showered upon the motivation construct and its many derivative and sub-constructs, should such a mediational relationship be further borne out in future research there may prove to be little practical benefit to understanding and promoting motivation if engagement is not to follow.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper, we set out to summarize and synthesize the literature on student engagement, and to propose a conceptual framework—accessible to scholars and practitioners alike—for understanding how student engagement may be promoted in the classroom. We began by laying out recent advances in the conceptualization of engagement as tri-dimensional, which served to frame our discussion of the literature reviewed throughout. We further argued for the central importance of engagement in the student learning and development processes, enumerating potential benefits ranging from better academic performance and persistence (in both high school and college) to a variety of indicators of individual well-being. Even classroom teachers and the broader classroom learning environment stand to benefit when the students in that classroom are engaged. We also highlighted the importance of taking a more contextualized approach, arguing that focusing on students’ experiences of engagement in school in general provides only a surface-level perspective, and that the primary elements of the engagement process are likely to be found within the classroom. We advanced a new theoretical model—grounded in existing theory from the instruction and learning literature—which incorporates the main elements of the classroom ecology (student, teacher, and content) and focuses primarily on the interactions among them. We concluded by offering suggestions for how this model and its various components might translate into practice, along with an agenda for future research.

By offering a conceptual framework for understanding student engagement in the classroom we have also laid the groundwork for future empirical research on how the main components of this model, the core interactions (student-teacher relationships, student-content relevance, and teacher-content competence), themselves and in combination, contribute to students’ engagement. More importantly, through this understanding—as well as by considering some concrete suggestions following from this understanding—classroom teachers in particular, and practitioners of education in general, will be better equipped to tailor their practice toward ensuring that classroom conditions for maximal student engagement are in place. The potential benefits of promoting student engagement in a time of widespread student disaffection with school—and the dire consequences that all too often follow—cannot be overestimated.

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