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Student engagement and its relationship with early high school dropout

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Abstract

Although the concept of school engagement figures prominently in most school dropout theories, there has been little empirical research conducted on its nature and course and, more importantly, the association with dropout. Information on the natural development of school engagement would greatly benefit those interested in preventing student alienation during adolescence. Using a longitudinal sample of 11,827 French-Canadian high school students, we tested behavioral, affective, cognitive indices of engagement both separately and as a global construct. We then assessed their contribution as prospective predictors of school dropout using factor analysis and structural equation modeling. Global engagement reliably predicted school dropout. Among its three specific dimensions, only behavioral engagement made a significant contribution in the prediction equation. Our findings confirm the robustness of the overall multidimensional construct of school engagement, which reflects both cognitive and psychosocial characteristics, and underscore the importance attributed to basic participation and compliance issues in reliably estimating risk of not completing basic schooling during adolescence.

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Keywords: School engagement; Achievement motivation; Involvement; Commitment; Participation; School dropout

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Limited achievement and academic attainment represent two important consequences of growing up poor (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2005; Pagani, Boulerice, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 1999). More than ever, younger generations need a basic education in order to successfully participate in the demanding labour force that awaits them (Heckman, 2006). Those not earning a high school diploma face a life-course of underemployment and its correlates, which, for many perpetuates their economically disadvantaged origins (Rumberger & Lamb, 2003). Aiming to circumvent student dropout and ultimately reduce the intergenerational cycle of poverty, researchers and clinicians have increasingly become interested in studying the nature and course of its putative mechanisms.

The construct of engagement is central to most theories of school dropout (Finn, 1989; Tinto, 1975). The present study aims to develop and examine the predictive value and multidimensional nature of student engagement. We test the contribution of its specific components in predicting student dropout. Our hope is to generate knowledge that will help orient the development of educational practices which promote success in high school (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

Engagement in theories of school dropout

The construct of student engagement originates in part from Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969) which places a great deal of emphasis on individual feelings of attachment and belongingness to social institutions. Youthful antisocial behavior is viewed as a breakdown of the bonds between the individual and society. Likewise, disengagement could result from a weakened relationship between the individual and educational institutions. The bonds in Social Control Theory are characterized by commitment, beliefs, attachment, and engagement. These theoretical elements have greatly influenced conceptualizations of student engagement in recent theories of dropout.

In Tinto's (1975) mediation model, school dropout represents an ongoing and unfolding process. From the time students enter school, they interact within its academic and social system. Individual and family background characteristics contribute to their commitment toward this institution and its academic goals. Individual commitments to specific academic goals directly influence involvement in school-related tasks and activities. In turn, commitment to school influences the time invested toward this institution. Taken together, goals and institutional commitments set the course of student engagement from school entry onward. These two characteristics and their evolution are believed to influence a youngster's academic and social experience at school and, in unfavourable conditions, can eventually play a role in the decision to leave the system altogether.

Finn's (1989) participation-identification model of school withdrawal also considers the construct of student engagement. In this model, engagement is defined by identification and participation at school. Identification refers to a sense of belongingness and the perceived worth of schooling. Participation comprises four distinct components that range from minimum to maximum engagement. These are responsiveness to requirements, participation in class-related initiatives and extracurricular activities, and decision-making. We expect students to identify more with school as they increase their participation. Conversely, low or absent participation, predicts gradual disengagement and eventual school withdrawal.

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