Context Matters: Concepts of School Engagement in the Context of Geographic Isolation

Gary G. Andersen, Ph.D., Fort Hays State University
Gary Andersen is an Assistant Professor in the Advanced Education Programs Department and Coordinator of the Transition to Teaching Program at Fort Hays State University. His research interests include creating cultures of thinking and student engagement. He can be reached at ggandersen@fhsu.edu.

Linda E. Feldstein, Ed.D., Fort Hays State University
Linda Feldstein is an Assistant Professor in the Teacher Education Department at Fort Hays State University. She can be reached at lefeldstein@fhsu.edu.

Introduction

In 2017, the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) launched the first wave of an ambitious school redesign project, titled Kansans Can (KSDE, 2019). The KSDE redesign plan included a set of general outcomes for schools that chose to participate: social-emotional growth, kindergarten readiness, individual plans of study, improved rates of high school graduation, and post-secondary success. Each of these outcomes are intended to support Kansas' mission for "lead(ing) the world in the success of each student" (Kansas Vision for Education), a vision that includes academic and cognitive preparation, technical and employability skills, and civic engagement (KSDE, 2020). High Plains High School (pseudonym) was among the schools chosen for the inaugural round of redesign in 2017. As part of their redesign plan, High Plains High School (HPHS) faculty and staff administered a survey intended to gauge students' engagement, hope, entrepreneurial aspiration, and career/financial literacy (Gallup, 2020). Results of that survey were troubling to faculty, as they examined data that indicated approximately 73% of students indicated they felt either "not disengaged" or "actively *dis*engaged" while at school (Gallup, 2016). HPHS administrators found these results worthy of further study, as they hoped to both better understand how their students, faculty, and families were conceptualizing school engagement, and how they might more fully encourage school engagement, enthusiasm, and involvement among all students.

High Plains High School, the setting for this case study research, is located in an isolated, agriculturally oriented landscape. U.S. census data indicates that nearly 62% of residents identify as Hispanic in origin and approximately 18% of residents live at or below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). A recent Washington Post article noted that this area of western Kansas is home to several cities ranked in the top ten of the most remote towns in the U.S., based on aspects like travel time to the nearest urban center, vegetation, and elevation (Van Dam, 2018). This makes access to institutes of higher education, as well as urban centers that might include the types of business and industry most likely to employ high school graduates very challenging to reach for HPHS students. HPHS administrators, in collaboration with a regional university, have chosen to make student engagement the focus of deep inquiry in order to better address the student concerns reflected in their survey data.

A shared vision of an organizational goal such as student engagement is critical to successful implementation of positive change (Costa & Kallick, 1995). In an attempt to gain a

better understanding of shared conceptions of engagement among the school community, researchers planned interviews with students, teachers, and parents. Our study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What conceptions of school/student engagement do the various constituency groups (faculty, students, parents) hold and how are those conceptions alike and/or different from one another?
2. How do we increase student engagement in school?
    a. What's currently working, and what's currently not working?
3. What hopes/beliefs/goals do students hold for and about their future, once they've graduated HS?

In this initial review of study data, the primary focus will be on research question one.

Conceptual Framework

Student engagement or school engagement does not have a universally agreed upon definition. Some might conceptualize engagement among students as displaying behaviors consonant with school compliance – things like paying attention, asking questions, or completing assignments on time. This is what Dary et al. (2016) found that many students and educators believed to be indicators of student engagement. This type of engagement may also extend to participation in extracurricular activities, positive conduct, and school attendance (Fredricks, 2011; Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2011).

In reality though, engagement is a complex, multi-dimensional construct open to highly idiosyncratic interpretations depending on personal viewpoint, context, and experiences, and is typically more focused on displaying sustained energy, commitment, and persistence with the tasks of learning. What does seem to reach something like consensus in the literature is that student/school engagement often is comprised of at least three elements: cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement, and emotional engagement (Dary et al., 2016; Fredricks, 2011; Li, 2011). Cognitive engagement is related to student investment in learning, behavioral engagement includes aspects like attendance and positive conduct, and emotional engagement is focused on positive emotion (Fredricks, 2011; Fredricks et al., 2004). This multi-dimensional concept of school engagement is drawn from a variety of research, including motivation, classroom climate, and self-regulated learning (Fredricks, 2011), and has been considered a predictor of long-term academic achievement (Montenegro, 2017).

Ritchhart (2015) speaks of an engaged student as one practiced in the skills of communication, collaboration, innovation, and problem-solving. Cognitively engaged students may tend to be more thoughtful and purposeful in exerting the effort needed to comprehend complex ideas and acquire difficult skills. This speaks to the use of self-regulatory and meta cognitive strategies, and goal directed behaviors (Fredricks, 2011). These attributes and skills represent a set of high-leverage competencies with cross-disciplinary appeal and lifelong usability.

Behavioral engagement, in addition to aspects of school like attendance and positive conduct, also encompasses task completion for things like assignments and projects (Fredricks, 2011). Participation in social or extracurricular activities and compliance with rules and routines are also considered in this category and may also be crucial to achieving positive achievement outcomes (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Emotional engagement focuses more specifically on the emotional states students report in reaction to schools, teachers, and related activities (Fredricks, 2011). These emotional states can be positive or negative, and are sometimes characterized as a sense of belonging or of being important to others at school (Fredricks et at., 2004). Because this sense of belonging appears so tightly woven into emotional engagement, we've chosen to combine them into a category we have termed social-emotional engagement and will be included in the continuation of our framework throughout the study. Hardre and Reeve (2003) have also found that this sense of importance and belonging is related to students' intention to continue in school.

Another concept of engagement has emerged in the literature recently, that of agentic engagement (Montenegro, 2017; Reeve, 2012). Agentic engagement has been articulated as one in which the learner has a sense of agency and contributes to the learning and instruction received (Reeve, 2012). These are students who demonstrate a sense of ownership, agency, and pride in their work at school (Fletcher, 2016) Further, agentic engagement has been connected to learner behaviors which are proactive, self-efficacious, and personalized (Montenegro, 2017).

This study seeks to understand the various school constituencies' conceptualization of student engagement using these frames of reference (cognitive, behavioral, social-emotional, agentic) from the literature base. An effective effort to increase student engagement in HPHS would benefit from a common understanding and agreement about the nature of student engagement.

Methodology

In order to begin developing an understanding of the complex conceptualizations, attitudes, and expectations related to engagement, researchers conducted interviews with current faculty, students, and parents at High Plains High School. Twenty-seven interviews were conducted (10 faculty, 9 students, 8 parents) representing three constituencies. Interview participants were selected by the school with a selection protocol in place to attempt to achieve a representative sample across the factors of role (faculty, student, parent), gender, engagement of student interviewees (low, moderate, high), faculty content areas and years of experience, and the home language of students and parents. In reality, the university researchers had to rely on the local school administration to secure and set up the interviews, so it was impossible to assure their strict adherence to such protocols. For example, only one interview out of 27 was set up in Spanish while the community has a larger representation of Spanish as the home language. In another example, 2/10 of the interviewed students self-reported as "very disengaged". This is only about half of the number needed for adequate representation. In summary, the researchers attempted to address issues of representation, but no claim is being made that it was achieved with fidelity. Individual interviews each used a protocol specifically designed for that population with the goal of exploring personal expectations and conceptions of school engagement and beliefs regarding future plans.

Interview prompts were developed by researchers to align with research questions, and included items like, "Describe how you see your student's engagement with learning in this school" (parents), "What inspires and engages you?" (students), and "What indicators do you employ in order to gauge student engagement?" (faculty). All interviews were conducted individually using web-based meeting software. Translation services were employed when necessary for parents who did not speak English. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and transcripts were subsequently reviewed and amended for accuracy. Reliability was fostered by both researchers calibrating their coding on four selected interviews. Coding and analysis of the

interviews was accomplished with Dedoose software. A combination of structured and open coding schemes was utilized in the analysis process. The structured coding followed the four selected orientations to engagement; behavioral engagement, social-emotional engagement, cognitive engagement and agentic engagement. Eight structured codes were utilized, one for each of the above orientations (behavioral, social-emotional, cognitive, and agentic), mentioned in either a positive or negative context (engagement (+) vs disengagement (-). An open coding process was then subsequently applied to the transcripts to identify concepts representing more unique perspectives.

Results

Table 1 below, shows the raw number of codes assigned to each orientation of engagement by constituency. An initial review of the interview data indicates that all constituencies seem to rely heavily on a behavioral interpretation of school engagement *(Table 1)*. Two hundred eighty-five references to behavioral concepts were recorded in the interviews and of those 149 were made by faculty. Behavioral orientation focuses on behaviors like attendance, compliance, work completion, and student conduct (Fredricks et al., 2004). Across constituencies, the interviews revealed comments like, "Everybody actually doing their work and having good grades and being on top of everything…" (student), or "What really inspires or engages them is when they see a zero in the grade book" (teacher). One of the unique aspects of this study is the inclusion of parents' interview data alongside students and teachers, and parents seem to put forth a slightly different view of what engagement in school means for their child. While there were responses indicating behavioral engagement was an important component, parents' responses appear to be more oriented to future success and pro-social skills. Responses like, "...being productive and helping in their community." or "...if you can do a little bit of everything to be more well-rounded ... be familiar with the different groups ... and have different types of friends." are a quick sampling of the broad range of responses from parents.

Frequency Table: Engagement Orientation Codes Per Constituency

	Faculty	Parents	Students	Totals
Behavioral	149	76	60	**285**
Social/emotional	68	73	77	**218**
Cognitive	77	54	92	**223**
Agentic	47	27	56	**130**
Totals	341	230	285	**856**

Table 1: Raw number of codes to conceptual orientations of student engagement by constituency

Students in the study gave responses that were more frequently coded to a positive agentic orientation of engagement. Students more frequently discussed their own goals and how school either contributed to them or did not contribute to them. For example, Student 8 responded to a question about what he thought about in school with this, "how I can better myself and if I do, do well in school now and if I'm engaged and I put effort forward, I think that doing well will help my future. And like I think about what I want to do for my family and what my dad has done for us. So I just think about, yeah-. I want to give back, I guess. With the effort that I put in now."

Teachers seemed to mention agentic engagement concepts in a more negative light, often describing in detail students lacking agentic engagement. Eighty one percent of comments coded to agentic disengagement came from teachers. Faculty 1 described students in this way, "...they have to be self-motivated and they're struggling with that. And so, they're like I'm bored, I'm bored. And I'm like, but you're failing two classes, you're not working on your work, you know, that kind of thing. It's kind of funny how they come up with this 'I'm bored' term."

All constituencies mentioned cognitive engagement concepts with roughly equal frequency with the exception of students, who more frequently referred to cognitive disengagement concepts compared with the other two groups. As an example, Student 1 responded to the question, "So what do you like to think about deeply when you're in school?" with this response, "When I'm in school… Um… Topics that don't necessarily relate to school." All three groups experienced some struggles when asked to articulate what students thought about deeply when in school.

Finally, the frequency of excerpts coded to social-emotional engagement was similar across all three constituencies. All groups mentioned the value of positive social relationships in the school. Interestingly, some students were asking for deeper and more meaningful relationships with their teachers. As an example, Student 5 responded to a question about what would make school more engaging, "just trying to have a relationship with the teacher".

Discussion & Implications

This study brings into sharp focus the perceptions of individual teachers, parents and students in contributing to a new vision for school. These perceptions are critical within the context of a school redesign initiative and in revealing the underlying cultural context of school engagement to educational leaders and practitioners at local and state levels. Using qualitative data to uncover these perceptions, educators can more clearly see paths to improved student engagement. Given the research relating school engagement with improved student outcomes, including graduation rates (Dary et al., 2016; Fredricks, 2013; Zyngier, 2008), finding avenues through which to make school improvements becomes not only an issue of efficacy but also of equity. For students in this remote location with limited vocational avenues for employment, these issues become even more crucial in defining post-secondary success.

Additionally this study supports the notion that all participants in a school redesign should also engage in dialog about their conceptions of school engagement. Parents, students, and faculty do not necessarily share the same conceptions about student engagement. Historically behavioristic notions of student engagement may be out of step with the stated goals in school redesign. All constituents would benefit from a more nuanced and complete view of what constitutes student engagement. Additionally, this research study is an example of collaboration between an institution of higher education and the stakeholders in a school setting (Association of Teacher Educators, 2007). Such collaborations and the resulting research are incredibly valuable in moving forward with school redesign in Kansas.

This study also provides some additional clarity around what is important to the constituencies interviewed. Students in this rural and isolated setting are concerned about the relevance and applicability of what they are learning to their future. Some of them recognize the limitations of the isolation in which they find themselves. Parents certainly want the best for their students and faculty and parents alike struggle to emerge from a behavioral orientation to engagement. This study provides motivation for the school redesign process to include human

and technology systems that provide better understandings, connections and mentoring opportunities with vocational goals that are geographically distant. This may also be instrumental in catalyzing changes in educator preparation programs that improve candidates' understanding of and ability to be effective in isolated rural school communities.

References

Association of Teacher Educators. (2007). *Standards for teacher educators*. Association of Teacher Educators. Manassas, VA. Retrieved from https://ate1.org/standards-for-teacher-educators

Costa, A. L. & Kallick, B. (1995). *Assessment in the learning organization: Shifting the paradigm*. Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.

Dary, T., Pickeral, T., Shumer, R., & Williams, A. (2016). *Weaving student engagement into the core practices of schools: A National Dropout Prevention Center/Network position paper*. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center/Network. Retrieved from www.dropoutprevention.org/resources/major-research-reports/student-engagement/student-engagement-2016-09.pdf

Fletcher, A.K. (2016). Exceeding expectations: Scaffolding agentic engagement through assessment as learning. *Educational Research, 58*(4), 400-419. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2016.1235909

Fredricks, J. A. (2011). Engagement in school and out-of-school contexts: A multidimensional view of engagement. *Theory into Practice*, *50*(4), 327–335. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2011.607401

Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. H. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, *74*(1), 59–109. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059

Gallup Education (2020). K-12 solutions: Transform your culture. Retrieved from: https://www.gallup.com/education/227675/k-12-solutions.aspx

Hardre, P.L. & Reeve, J. (2003). A motivational model of rural students' intentions to persist in, versus drop out of, high school. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 95*(2), p. 347-356.

Kansas Department of Education (2020). *Kansans can: Kansas vision for education.* Retreived from https://www.ksde.org/Agency/Fiscal-and-Administrative-Services/Communications-and-Recognition-Programs/Vision-Kansans-Can

Li, Y. (2011). School engagement: What it is and why it is important for positive your development. In R. Lerner, J. Lerner, & J. Benson (Eds.), *Advances in child development and behavior.* Volume 41. Waltham, MA: Elsevier.

Montenegro, A. (2017). Understanding the concept of student agentic engagement for learning. *Columbian Applied Linguistics Journal 19* (1), 117-128.

Ritchhart, R. (2015). *Creating cultures of thinking.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Reeve, J. (2012). A self-determination theory perspective on student engagement. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschly, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of research on student engagement* (pp. 149–172). Boston, MA: Springer US.

U. S. Census Bureau (2018). *Selected economic characteristics*. Retrieved from: https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?d=ACS%205-Year%20Estimates%20Data%20Profiles&table=DP03&tid=ACSDP5Y2018.DP03&g=0400000US20_1600000US2039825

Van Dam, A. (2018, February 20). Using the best data possible, we set out to find the middle of nowhere. *The Washington Post.* Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/02/20/using-the-best-data-possible-we-set-out-to-find-the-middle-of-nowhere/

Wang, M. & Eccles, J.S. (2011). Adolescent behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement trajectories in school and their differential relations to educational success. Journal of Research on Adolescence, 22 (1), p. 31-39. DOI: 10.1111/j.1532-7795.2011.00753.

Zyngier, D. (2008). (Re)conceptualising student engagement: Doing education not doing time. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *24*(7), 1765–1776. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2007.09.004