The Advocate

Volume 29
Number 1 *Spring--Summer 2024*

Article 3

August 2024

# A Practitioner's Conceptualization of Student Engagement

Alan English
*Bethany College - Lindsborg*, englishae@bethanylb.edu



## Recommended Citation

English, Alan (2024) "A Practitioner's Conceptualization of Student Engagement," *The Advocate*: Vol. 29: No. 1. https://doi.org/10.4148/2637-4552.1189

# A Practitioner's Conceptualization of Student Engagement

## Abstract

Student engagement is one of the most promising concepts in educational research today, as it has been positively correlated to a host of desirable outcomes and negatively correlated to a variety of undesirable outcomes. While there has been tremendous progress in advancing our understanding of student engagement including the developing of student engagement models in recent years, most of that work has been focused on advancing educational research rather than disseminating best practices to P-12 practitioners. The aim here is to provide practitioners a brief coverage on the current literature on student engagement, a concise, practical model of engagement, and its potential practical applications.

## Keywords

Student engagement; Self-efficacy; Motivation; Positive feedback loop

# A Practitioner's Conceptualization of Student Engagement

***Alan English***
***Bethany College***

*Alan English is an associate professor and Chair of the Department of Education at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas. He can be reached at Englishae@bethanylb.edu.*

If you catch them on their 20-minute lunch break, teachers today will commonly tell you that the vast majority of their students aren't failing due to lack of ability. It's due to a lack of engagement. More than twenty years ago, Larson (2000) said, "A central question of youth development is how to get adolescents' fires lit, how to have them develop the complex of dispositions and skills needed to take charge of their lives". The situation is seemingly unchanged. More recent work has correlated student engagement to a host of positive outcomes (Archambault & Dupéré, 2017; Chen et al.; 2020; Lee, 2014; Suárez et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2023) while disengagement has been associated with a host of negative outcomes (Archambult et al., 2009; Fredricks, 2014, p.14; Virtanen et al, 2014; Wang & Fredericks, 2014). Continual efforts to understand student engagement and empower teachers with implementable strategies to maximize student engagement is therefore of the upmost importance.

As researchers, we have made strides in developing more precise models of engagement in recent years (Kahu, 2018; Virtanen et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2019) that will undoubtedly continue to advance student engagement research. Still, one of the most important reasons for educational research is to disseminate findings to practitioners so that they can transform otherwise abstract findings into policy and teaching strategies. Given the pivotal role that engagement can have on student success, the aim here is to provide practitioners a brief coverage on the current literature on student engagement as well as a concise, practical model of engagement and potential practical applications.

## Engagement

A number of scholars have attempted to define student engagement, but no consensus has taken place thus far. For example, engagement has been defined as "the quality of children's participation in or involvement with school activities" (Wang et al., 2019), "energy in action" (Filsecker & Kerres, 2014), and the "outward manifestation of motivation" (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012, p. 22). Regardless of the precise definition one uses, it does seem to be widely agreed that engagement is a multifaceted construct. Traditionally, researchers divided engagement in to three categories: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Behavioral engagement encompasses attendance at, participation in, and compliance to expectations during activities. Cognitive engagement describes a student's willingness to expend mental energy in the face of challenging tasks. Emotional engagement describes a sense of belonging in the classroom and the degree to which a bond has been created between the student and classmates or teachers (English, 2021; Fredricks et al., 2004). More recently, researchers have added additional categories of engagement. The most prominent and promising of these is agentic engagement, which describes a student's effort to enhance classroom engagement. To display agentic

engagement, for example, a student might ask a thought-provoking question or give instructional suggestions (English, 2021; Reeve, 2013; Zambrano et al., 2023).

Student engagement is among the most paramount of qualities for a student to display, as numerous studies have associated it with a host of positive academic outcomes including higher grade point average, reading performance, and high school graduation, (Archambault & Dupéré, 2017; Chen et al.; 2020; Lee, 2014; Suárez et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2023) as well as general well-being (Wong et al., 2023). What's more, student engagement has been negatively associated with delinquency, truancy, dropping out, and substance abuse (Archambult et al., 2009; Fredricks, 2014, p.14; Virtanen et al, 2014; Wang & Fredericks, 2014). Fortunately, student engagement seems to display two important characteristics. First, it is tiered, meaning that a student can display low, moderate, or high levels of engagement (Archambault et al., 2009; Archumbault & Dupéré, 2017; English, 2021; Fredricks et al., 2004). Secondly, engagement is malleable. Students' levels of engagement have demonstrated the ability to raise or lower over time (Archambault et al., 2009; English, 2021; Hart et al., 2011; Lee, 2014; Chen et al., 2020). Given the extensive body of research that has demonstrated the key role that student engagement can play on a student's ultimate success or failure in the classroom, it is critical that a concise, practical model of student engagement be given to practitioners so that they can work to increase their students' levels of engagement as effectively and efficiently as possible.

## Student Engagement Model

A number of researchers have done quality work in attempting to construct models of engagement. Recent examples include Kahu & Nelson, 2018 and Wang et al., 2019. While their work was both productive and important, it was most useful in advancing student engagement research. Ultimately, the goal of education research is to put that advancement of knowledge into practitioners' hands, who will ultimately implement it in real classrooms. While much is yet to be understood about student engagement, it may be time to construct a concise, practical model specifically for this purpose. See Figure One for the Practitioner's Conceptualization of Student Engagement.

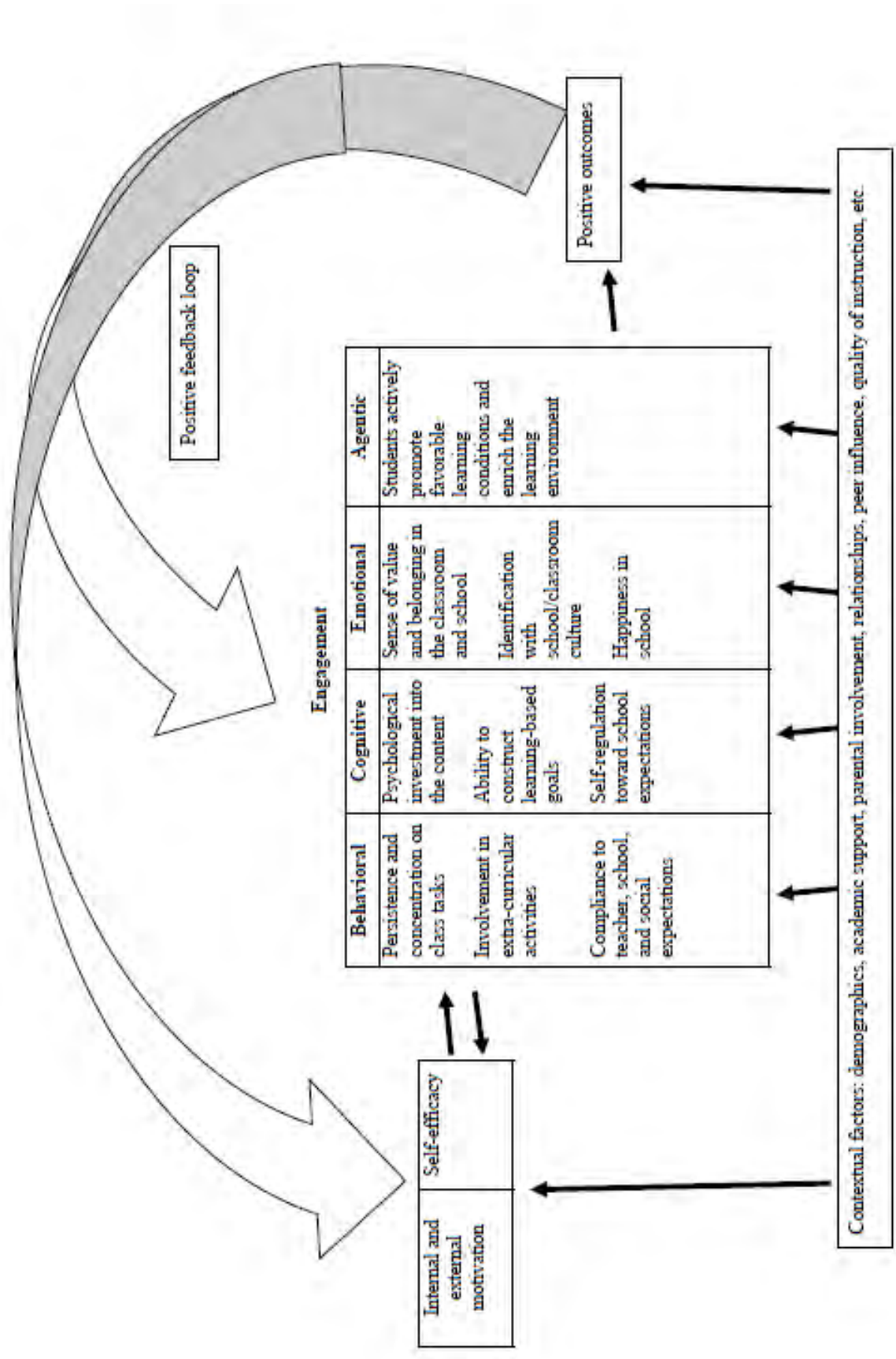


*Figure 1.* A Practitioner's Conceptualization of Student Engagement

## Precursors to Engagement

One important factor in understanding student engagement is the precursors that lead to a student being engaged. Among these are a student's motivation. Research indicates that student motivation is an important precursor to engagement (Lawson, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Suárez et al., 2019). While all motivation seems to be helpful to triggering a sense of engagement, intrinsic motivation (rather than doing work to avoid punishment or please others) seems to lead to a deeper sense of engagement (Suárez et al., 2019). Secondly, a student's self-efficacy, or their belief that they can realize success on a given task, can influence levels of engagement (Jung, et al., 2023; Olivier et al., 2019). Collectively, it can be said that students that are motivated and believe that they are capable of success are much more highly engaged.

## Contextual Factors

A broad range of contextual factors, however, can influence a student at all stages of this model including their levels of motivation and self-efficacy. A student's sociocultural factors (race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, etc.) influence their relationship with the school system, teachers, and peers in a variety of complex ways that undoubtedly influence engagement (Engels et al., 2019; Kang et al., 2023; Virtanen et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2019; Zambrano et al., 2023). For example, parents in low-socioeconomic families tend to adopt more authoritarian parenting styles, are less likely to expose their children to intellectually-enriching experiences, and are less involved in the school system as compared to higher socioeconomic status families (Lareau, 2011).

Students that receive higher levels of academic support display higher levels of engagement. More specifically, both parent and teacher academic support are positively associated with higher levels of behavioral engagement (Virtanen et al., 2014). In another study, teacher support increased both self-efficacy and engagement in students (Jung, 2023). At home, parents can increase students' engagement by including learning activities at home, practicing effective discipline strategies, regularly communicating about school, and fostering a positive relationship with the school (Ribeiro et al., 2023). It seems that part of academic support is also an appropriate level of achievement pressure. While excessive achievement pressure on students can be counterproductive (via stress or anxiety), students that are exposed to achievement pressure proportional to their academic goals and motivation display higher levels of engagement (Jung, 2023).

Perhaps the most widely researched and discussed contextual factor that can influence student engagement is the presence of a positive relationship in the classroom (Engels et al., 2016; Jung, 2023; Lawson, 2017; Ribeiro et al., 2023). While the importance of student-teacher relationships is widely documented, more research is needed on the precise mechanism that positive relationships utilize to increase engagement. Jung (2023) demonstrated that positive relationships with fifth through seventh grade students increased their self-efficacy. It has also been theorized, however, that positive relationships create a sense of security in the student, encouraging them to take academic risks that are necessary to realizing potential and fostering more active participation in school (Ribeiro et al., 2023). Teacher-student relationships may be best viewed from a "do no harm" perspective, as negative teacher-student relationships have been

demonstrated to decrease student engagement even more than positive relationships can enhance engagement (Kang et al., 2023). Regardless, it seems evident that positive teacher-student relationships are of paramount importance in maximizing student engagement.

Peers also seem to be able to influence student engagement, as well-liked peers display lower levels of behavioral engagement (Engels et al., 2015) and youth self-select into peer groups with similar levels of behavioral engagement (Kindermann, 2016; Wang, et al., 2018). One study demonstrated that high school students were less engaged when working in a peer group but more likely to be engaged when a teacher was interacting with the group and/or individual student (Nguyen et al., 2018), suggesting that an active teacher presence within peer groups is helpful in maintaining on-task behavior. These effects likely magnify during adolescence, as youth become increasingly independent of adults and status among peers becomes increasingly important.

The quality of instruction in the classroom can influence student engagement. Students are more engaged when they perceive the content to be relevant (Assor et al., 2002), there is an element of meaningful student choice and autonomy in the lesson (Fredricks et al., 2004; Fredricks, 2014, pp. 88-89; Virtanen et al, 2014; Wang et al., 2015), and the lesson is hands-on, challenging, and authentic (Marks, 2000). Collectively, it seems that there is not a single style of instruction that enhances student engagement but that students are most engaged when they are actively involved in a lesson that is centered around content they perceive to be meaningful in one way or other.

Finally, it should be noted that this list of contextual factors is not intended to be exhaustive. As the purpose here is to provide practitioners a concise, practical model, contextual factors with the strongest body of evidence associated with them and most concrete practical applications were chosen. As education is at its heart dealing with complex human beings, there are undoubtedly a host of other contextual factors that influence a student's level of engagement.

### Positive Feedback Loop

Perhaps the most prominent feature of the Practitioner's Conceptualization of Student Engagement is the positive feedback loop. When a student experiences positive academic outcomes (e.g., mastery of a given concept, completion of a major project, a strong score on an exam, or passing a specific course) those outcomes are undoubtedly impacted by contextual factors in similar ways to a student's motivation, self-efficacy, and engagement. For example, a student with stronger levels of parental involvement may receive more praise for positive outcomes and the outcome will more powerfully resonate with the student. Nevertheless, the positive outcome in turn encourages higher levels of engagement, self-efficacy, and motivation (Chen, 2020; Kahu, 2018; Lawson & Lawson, 2013; Reeve, 2012). These benefits are capable of being carried for multiple school years (Chen, 2020).

## Practical Applications

A number of practical applications can be taken from this presented model. First, given that engagement is both tiered and malleable, teachers ought to reward all displays of engagement, particularly low-levels of engagement from chronically disengaged students. If, for example, a

student brings necessary supplies to class for the first time in a week, it might be tempting to overlook the act as an inconsequential display of expected behavior. If praised and/or presented with a natural reward, it seems likely that the student's levels of engagement could increase over time.

Teachers also ought to work to identify the contextual factors most prominently at play in a student's life early in the school year. As contextual factors impact all stages of the engagement model, they can dramatically impact a student's ultimate levels of achievement. Frustratingly, however, teachers must be aware of their limitations. Many contextual factors are not within the realistic ability of an individual teacher to impact. For example, a student's demographic context cannot be readily changed. Other contextual factors may be able to be partly impacted in the classroom. While a teacher cannot realistically impact the influence a student's peers are making on them throughout much of the week, all hope for positive impact is not lost. A teacher can strive to create a culture conducive to academic success in the classroom and arrange peer groups optimally. Other contextual factors seem well within a teacher's purview. A teacher, for example, typically has control over the quality of instruction in the room. Teachers should strive to implement characteristics of lessons which research suggests enhance engagement. These include relevant and authentic content, student choice, student autonomy, hands-on instruction, and challenging tasks. While including all these characteristics in a single lesson might not be realistic, teachers should work to include at least some of them continually. One option of instruction style that has been demonstrated to improve behavioral engagement is project-based learning (English, 2018). Teachers would do well to find ways that they could incorporate project-based learning into their curriculum.

Finally, given the existence of engagement's positive feedback loop, teachers should strive to create opportunities for meaningful success on both the long-term and short-term scale. Early in the school year, teachers would do well to assign work that most (if not all) students are capable of completing successfully. On the short-term, teachers might consider opening lessons with introductory or review content that all students are capable of interacting with. The purpose of this is not to decrease the overall level of academic rigor in the classroom but to give early opportunities of success, beginning the engagement positive feedback loop, and increasing student engagement before more rigorous work is introduced.

## Conclusion

Student engagement is a particularly promising characteristic in educational research. Not only are a host of positive outcomes associated with it, it is also a malleable trait. A strong body of literature, including useful models of engagement, has been constructed thus far. Still, much of that body of knowledge is focused on advancing research rather disseminating that knowledge to teachers. This paper has aimed to provide a brief overview of current engagement research, a practical, concise model of engagement, and practical applications of how a teacher might implement it.

## References


Archambault, I. & Dupéré, V. (2017). Joint trajectories of behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement in elementary school. *The Journal of Educational Research 110*(2), 188-198. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220671.2015.1060931

Archambault, I., Janosz, M., Morizot, J., & Pagani, L. (2009). Adolescent behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement in school: Relationship to dropout. *Journal of School Health 79*(9), 408-415.

Assor, A., Kaplan, H., & Roth, G. (2002). *British Journal of Educational Psychology 72*, 261-278.

Chen, J., Huebner, E. & Tien, L. (2020). Longitudinal relations between hope and academic achievement in elementary school students: Behavioral engagement as a mediator. *Learning and Individual Differences 78*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2020.101824

Engels, M., Colpin, H., Leeuwen, K., Bijttebier, P., Van Den Noortgate, W., Claes, S., Goossens, L., & Verschueren, K. (2016). Behavioral engagement, peer status, and teacher–student relationships in adolescence: A longitudinal study on reciprocal influences. *The Journal of Educational Research* 45, 1192–1207. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-016-0414-5

English, A. (2018). Utilizing project-based learning to increase engagement and performance in the high school classroom. *Prairie Journal of Educational Research, 2*(1), 4-32. https://doi.org/10.4148/2373-0994.1017

English, A. (2021). Engagement and compliance in education today. *Learning: Research and Practice*, 8(2). 139-147. https://doi.org/10.1080/23735082.2022.2085771

Filsecker, M. & Kerres, M. (2014). Engagement as a volitional construct: A framework for evidence-based research on educational games. *Simulation & Gaming 45*(4-5) 450–470. https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878114553569

Fredricks, J., Blumenfeld, P., & Paris, A. (2004). School engagement: Potential of the concept, state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research 74*(1), 59-109.

Fredricks, J. (2014). *Eight Myths of Student Disengagement*. Corwin.

Hart, S., Stewart, K., Jimerson, S. (2011). The student engagement in schools questionnaire (SESQ) and the teacher engagement report form-new (TERF-N): Examining the preliminary evidence. *Contemporary School Psychology 15*, 67-79.

Jung, Y., Lim, S., & Fan, L. (2023). Teacher's factors affecting students' math class engagement: The mediating effect of math self-efficacy. *Educational Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2023.2267809

Kahu, E. & Nelson, K. (2018) Student engagement in the educational interface: Understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development 37*(1), 58-71, https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197

Kang, D., Stough, L., Yoon, M., & Liew, J. (2023) The association between teacher–student relationships and school engagement: An investigation of gender differences. *Educational Psychology, 43*(6), 623-642. https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2023.2225816

Kindermann, T. A. (2016). Peer group influences on students' academic motivation. In K. R. Wentzel & G. B. Ramani (Eds.), *Handbook of social influences in school contexts: Social-emotional, motivation, and cognitive outcomes* (pp. 31–47). Routledge.

Lareau, A. (2011). *Unequal Childhoods in Context: Results from a Quantitative Analysis. Unequal Childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. 2nd ed. University of California Press.

Larson, R. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist* 55(1).

Lawson, M. & Lawson H. (2013). New conceptional frameworks for student engagement research, policy, and practice. *Review of Educational Research 83*(3), 432-479.

Lawson, M. (2017). Commentary: Bridging student engagement research and practice. *School Psychology International 38(3)*, 221-239. https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034317708010

Lee, J. (2014). The relationship between student engagement and academic performance: Is it a myth or reality?. *The Journal of Educational Research 107*, 177-185.

Marks, H. M. (2000). Student engagement in instructional activity: Patterns in the elementary, middle, and high school years. *American Educational Research Journal 37*, 153–184. doi:10.3102/00028312037001153

Olivier, E., Archambault, I., & Dupéré, V. (2018). Boys' and girls' latent profiles of behavior and social adjustment in school: Longitudinal links with later student behavioral engagement and academic achievement?. *Journal of School Psychology 69,* (28-44). https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2018.05.006

Reeve, J. (2012). A self-determination theory perspective on student engagement. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschley, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (pp. 149-174). Springer Science+Business Media.

Riberio, A., Pereira, A., Pedro, M., & Roberto, M. (2023). Predictors of child student engagement in elementary school: A mixed-methods study exploring the role of externalising problems. *Infant & Child Development 32*(5). https://doi.org/10.1002/icd.2449

Rodriguez, S., Núñez, J., Valle, A., Freire, C., Ferradás, M., & Rodríguez-Llorente, C. (2019). Relationship between students' prior academic achievement and homework behavioral engagement: The mediating/moderating role of learning motivation. *Frontiers in Psychology 10*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01047

Skinner, E & Pitzer, J. (2012). Developmental dynamics of student engagement, coping, and everyday resilience. In S. L. Christenson, A. L. Reschley, & C. Wylie (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (pp. 21-44). Springer Science+Business Media.

Suárez N., Regueiro, B., Estévez, I., Ferradás, M., Guisande, M., & Rodríguez, S. (2019). Individual precursors of student homework behavioral engagement: The role of intrinsic motivation, perceived homework utility and homework attitude. *Frontiers in Psychology 10*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00941

Virtanen, T., Lerkkanen, M., Poikkeus, A., Kuorelahti, M. (2014). Student behavioral engagement as a mediator between teacher, family, and peer support and school truancy. *Learning and Individual Differences 36*. 201-206. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/ j.lindif.2014.09.001

Wang, H-C., Huang, H-T., & Hsu, C-C. (2015). The impact of choice on EFL students' motivation and engagement with L2 vocabulary learning. *Taiwan Journal of TESOL 12*(2), 1-40.

Wang, M-T. & Fredricks, J. (2014). The reciprocal links between school engagement, youth problem behaviors, and school dropout during adolescence. *Child Development 85*(2), 722-737. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12138

Wang, M.-T., Kiuru, N., Degol, J. L., & Salmela-Aro, K. (2018). Friends, academic achievement, and school engagement during adolescence: A social network approach to peer influence and selection effects. *Learning and Instruction, 58,* 148–160.

Wang, M-T., Degol, J., & Henry, D. (2019). An integrative development-in-sociocultural-context model for children's engagement in learning. *American Psychologist 74*(9), 1186-1102. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000522

Wong, Z. Y., Liem, G. A. D., Chan, M., & Datu, J. A. D. (2023). Student engagement and its association with academic achievement and subjective well-being: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/edu0000833

Zambrano, J., Patall, E., Kennedy, A., Aguilera C., & Yates N. (2023). Qualitative study of urban high school teachers' beliefs about students' agentic engagement. *The Journal of Experimental Education.* https://doi.org/10.1080/00220973.2023.2238632