

Engagement in Australian schools

A paper prepared by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership

Policy makers and researchers have long focused on trying to combat ‘disengaged’ behaviours, rather than on understanding and promoting engagement among students. This focus only captures part of the issue - engagement is a complex cognitive process, including a student’s psychological investment in their own learning and personal learning strategies.¹ The internal nature of much engagement means that it is difficult to define and measure. As such, it has been hard for researchers and policy makers to determine which solutions can aid engagement and the impact student engagement can have on learning outcomes.

Section 1 addresses the ambiguity in the term ‘engagement’ and provides a multi-levelled definition that covers behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement in learning. The complexity of the definition is reflected in the measurement difficulties outlined in Section 2. This includes practical strategies to assess engagement. Section 3 discusses how engagement can lead to positive outcomes for students, and Section 4 discusses what could be done to promote engagement. Section 5 looks at what governments currently do in this area. Perhaps unsurprisingly, governments tend to focus on the negative aspects of disengagement instead of the positive aspects of engaged learning. Finally, suggestions for the next steps in research and policy on disengagement are listed in Section 6.

1 What is engagement?

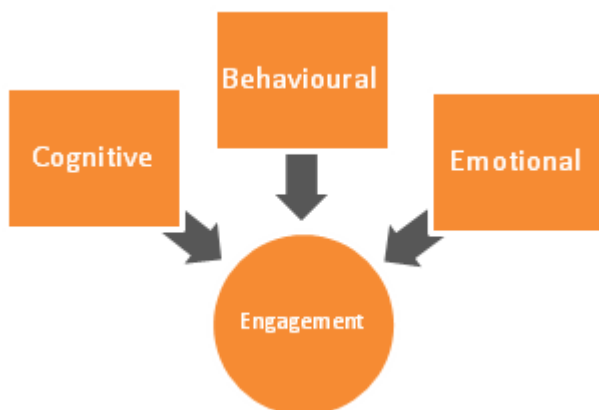
Engagement is an ambiguous term; poorly defined and difficult to measure. Engagement is not simply about good classroom behaviour or attendance, but a connection with learning.² The student who is quietly sitting at the back of the classroom not participating in discussions or completing their work is as disengaged as a child who is talking with friends or the child who did not show up at school.

This ambiguity means engagement is difficult to quantify. This may be why most analyses and attempts to quantify engagement focus on more tangible negative behaviours and learning outcomes.

Fredericks *et al.* (2004) propose a framework for considering engagement that distinguishes between cognitive, behavioural and emotional engagement.

¹ Fredericks, *et al.*
(2004) ² *Ibid.*; Seal
(2009)

Figure 1: Framework for understanding engagement³



Cognitive engagement is not clearly defined, and is therefore difficult to measure. It can be understood as a student's psychological investment in their own learning.⁴ This is the hardest to detect from behaviours alone - it is "not just students doing things but it is something happening inside their heads".⁵ When cognitively engaged, students concentrate, focus on achieving goals, are flexible in their work and cope with failure.⁶ This is different from high performance: a student who is performing well may still be disengaged if they are coasting and not motivated to exert themselves more than is necessary to get by.⁷

Behavioural engagement refers to students' participation in learning and classroom activities.⁸ This includes adhering to behaviour rules, attending lessons as required and arriving at classes on time.⁹ Importantly, behavioural engagement refers to the learning behaviours that are important for high student performance, which may include collaboration and communication with peers.¹⁰ It also covers student participation in other aspects of school life, such as extracurricular activities and school social life.¹¹

Behavioural engagement is helpful for cognitive engagement to occur as it ensures students are physically ready and willing to learn. It is also the aspect of engagement most often measured and reported, largely because it is the easiest to measure: it is easy to tell if a student is in the classroom; it is harder to tell if they are actually working. However, quantitative assessments tend to focus on negative disengaged behaviours rather than positive learning behaviours in the classroom.

Emotional engagement refers to the relationships between students and their teachers, classmates and school.¹² This has also been called 'identification' with school and learning practices.¹³

Students are engaged when they feel included in the school and feel an emotional bond with the school, its teachers and their peers.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, it is difficult to separate these three facets of engagement in a quantitative assessment.

³ Adapted from Fredericks, *et al.* (2004) and Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2009)

⁴ Willms (2003); Fredericks and McColskey (2012); School A to Z (2013)

⁵ Department of Education and Training (NSW)

(2006) ⁶ Fredericks, *et al.* (2004)

⁷ Willms (2003); Fredericks, *et al.* (2004)

⁸ Willms (2003); Finn and Zimmer (2012)

⁹ Fredericks and McColskey *ibid.*

¹⁰ Huang Pu District Teacher Training Institute (2011)

¹¹ Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2013)

¹² Fredericks and McColskey (2012)

¹³ Finn and Zimmer *ibid.*