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

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Abstract

This case study research represents an attempt to understand conceptions of school engagement in a rural, isolated, agricultural mid-western community. Local school administrators, in collaboration with a regional university, chose to make student engagement the focus of deep inquiry in order to better address student concerns, improve teaching, and student outcomes (Association of Teacher Educators, 2007). Researchers conducted 27 interviews with a representative sample of students, teachers, and parents in a local high school, using an interview protocol specifically designed for each constituency. Interview data was coded considering 4 aspects of student engagement (behavioral, social-emotional, cognitive and agentic). The study results point to a mostly behavioral, or compliance driven concept of engagement among all groups interviewed. Examination of data also shows that students tended to voice a desire for a higher degree of agentic engagement, along with a strong need for positive relationships with teaching faculty. This points to a need for both shared conceptions of elements of a change process (Costa & Kallick, 1995) and for teacher educators to more deeply address preservice students' understanding of engagement, as well as a potential to shift to a conceptual understanding of student engagement that is more agentic in nature. Implications include avenues toward broadening conceptions of engagement among staff, students, and parents; increased understanding and implementation of educational strategies designed to increase engagement at both the classroom and school levels; and catalyzing changes in educator preparation programs that improve candidates' understanding of isolated rural school communities.

Introduction

In 2017, the Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE) launched the first ambitious wave of a school redesign project, titled Kansans Can (KSDE, 2019 & (KSDE, 2020).   High Plains High School (pseudonym) was among the first schools chosen for redesign in 2017. As part of their redesign plan, High Plains High School (HPHS) administered a survey intended to gauge students' engagement, hope, entrepreneurial aspiration, and career/financial literacy (Gallup, 2020). Results of that survey were troubling indicating that approximately 73% of students indicated they felt either "not disengaged" or "actively *dis*engaged" while at school (Gallup, 2016).

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 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 isolation limits students' access to institutes of higher education and many types of businesses and careers. HPHS administrators, in collaboration with a regional university, chose to make student engagement the focus of deep inquiry in order to better address the student concerns reflected in their survey data.

This collaboration allowed university professors to partner with a regional educational institution in tackling the challenges raised by the local education agency. Outreach and partnership of this kind can improve teacher preparation by modeling engagement in research and development projects for teacher candidates, as well as using research findings to improve

teacher candidates practices as they pursue careers as professional educators (Association of Teacher Educators, 2007).

A shared vision of an organizational goal such as student engagement is critical to successful implementation of positive change (Costa & Kallick, 1995). This study is an attempt to gain a better understanding of shared conceptions of engagement among the school community and was guided primarily by the following research question:

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?

Literature Review

Student engagement or school engagement does not have a universally agreed upon definition. Some 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 your personal viewpoint, context, and experiences, and is typically more focused on displaying sustained energy, commitment, and persistence for tasks of learning. What does seem to reach something like consensus in the literature is that student/school engagement is often composed 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 research on motivation, classroom climate, and self-regulated learning (Fredricks, 2011), and has been considered a predictor of long-term academic achievement (Montenegro, 2017).

Ritchart (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 skills, metacognitive 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, the researchers chose to combine them into a category termed social-emotional engagement, included in the continuation of the research 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.

It is also important that teacher education structures and practices reflect a broader and more commonly held view of student engagement. Student engagement is an almost universally held goal of many levels of education as a profession, yet it is clear that the concept itself still holds variance. This research addresses Standards 1, 2 and 6 from the Standards for teacher educators (Association for Teacher Educators, 2007) and informs teacher educators about the nuances of the concept of student engagement and will lead to a more informed and complete target for future work in the field.

Methodology

Participants

In order to develop 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 interviewees resulted from a

representative selection process conducted by the school. Factors of self-reported school engagement, home language, gender, role, teaching content area, and teacher longevity were considered in the selection process to attempt to achieve a representative sample. The sample consisted of 10 faculty members, 8 parents, and 9 students.

Data Sources / Instrument

Individual protocols were developed for each constituency group survey using the four aspects of engagement identified in the literature (cognitive, behavioral, social-emotional, and agentic). Each interview protocol included 17 questions, and each question was similarly aimed at a particular aspect of engagement while worded to be appropriate to the audience. For example, an interview question developed for students asked, "What inspires and engages you?"; while the same question was worded slightly differently for parents, and asked, "what do you think inspires or engages your student?" This design allowed researchers to investigate each area of engagement in a similar way for each constituency group.

Interview prompts were developed to investigate all three research questions, and included items like, "Describe how you see your student's engagement with learning in this school?", "In a perfect world, what would engagement in school look like for you ?", and "What indicators do you employ in order to gauge student engagement?".

Data Collection

All interviews were conducted individually using Zoom 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.

Analysis

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 were utilized in the analysis process. The structured coding followed 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).

Results/Findings

Behavioral Engagement

A review of interview data indicates that students and teachers both seem to rely on a predominantly behavioral interpretation of school engagement. This view encompasses behaviors like attendance, compliance, work completion, and student conduct (Fredricks et al., 2004). Across both constituencies, we heard 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. While parental responses showed behavioral engagement was an important component, they 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... and have different types of friends." are a quick sampling of the broad range of responses from parents.

Agentic Engagement

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."

Cognitive Engagement

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.

Social-Emotional Engagement

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, responded, "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. 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. Students yearn for more meaningful and supportive relationships with teachers. Parents certainly want the best for their students and faculty and parents alike struggle to move beyond a behavioral understanding of engagement toward a more inclusive and personal view on the meaning and operationalization of the concept of true student engagement in the classroom.

This study provides motivation for the school redesign process to include human and technology systems that provide better understanding, connections and mentoring opportunities with vocational goals that are geographically distant. Common narratives around rural schools and educators can tend to focus on a lack of professional knowledge and resistance to change among teachers (Burton, Brown, & Johnson, 2013). Professional isolation does indeed present its own form of challenge, and the sense of place teachers bring to their work with students may play an important role in encouraging a continued sense of connection to school, community, and future plans. The results of this study offer an opportunity for educator preparation programs to better prepare teacher candidates for the challenges inherent in rural teaching.

This study can be instrumental in catalyzing changes in educator preparation programs that improve candidates' understanding of and ability to be effective in isolated rural school

communities. The data from this study reflect a need for teacher preparation programs to consider more deeply the various conceptual underpinnings of student engagement and the viewpoints of various school constituencies in implementing the educational process. Building on the work of Schlecty (2009) and Beasley, Gist, & Imbeau (2014), it seems that a deeper conversation is warranted about how future teachers can be influential in broadening and clarifying the concept of student engagement and how engagement might be fostered in schools.

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