

Teachers' Conceptions of Student Engagement in Learning: The Case of Three Urban Schools

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While student engagement plays a central role in the education process, defining it is challenging. This study examines teachers' conceptions of the social and cultural dimensions of student engagement in learning at three low-achieving schools located in a low socioeconomic status (SES) urban area. Sixteen teachers and administrators from the three schools participated in two focus group discussions about their definitions of student engagement, indicators of and factors affecting student engagement, and how to facilitate it. The findings indicate that teachers' conceptions of student engagement have profound ramifications for the ways that they approach their work. Additionally, the teachers recognize that student engagement is a symptom displayed by individuals, but the roots of engagement lay elsewhere. The teachers also described a wide range of strategies to enhance their students' engagement that focused primarily on the student, the teacher and the classroom through improving student-teacher relationships, incorporating out-of-school issues in the curriculum and the classroom, and having teachers show engagement with educational material. We conclude by outlining several implications for practice and policy and by calling for more research on the origins, development and consequences of teachers' conceptions of student engagement.

Alors que l'engagement des élèves joue un rôle central dans le processus éducatif, en définir le sens représente un défi. Cette étude porte sur les conceptions qu'ont les enseignants des dimensions sociales et culturelles de l'engagement des élèves dans trois écoles peu performantes situées dans des régions urbaines à faible statut socioéconomique. Seize enseignants et administrateurs de trois écoles ont participé à des discussions thématiques de groupe pour partager ce qu'ils entendaient par « engagement des élèves », les indicateurs de celui-ci, les facteurs qui l'influençaient et les moyens de le faciliter. Les résultats indiquent que les conceptions qu'ont les enseignants de l'engagement des élèves ont des répercussions profondes sur leur façon d'aborder leur travail. De plus, les enseignants reconnaissent que l'engagement des élèves est un symptôme que manifeste une personne, mais que les racines en sont ailleurs. Les enseignants ont décrit une vaste gamme de stratégies qui visent l'augmentation de l'engagement des élèves, qui sont axées surtout sur l'élève, l'enseignant et la salle de classe, et qui reposent sur l'amélioration du rapport enseignant-élève, l'intégration d'enjeux externes dans le programme d'études et une manifestation d'engagement de la part des enseignants avec la matière à l'étude. Nous concluons en présentant les grandes lignes des incidences de cette étude sur la pratique et la politique, et en réclamant davantage de recherche sur les origines, le développement et les conséquences des conceptions qu'ont les enseignants de l'engagement des élèves.

This study examined the conceptions of student engagement in learning held by sixteen teachers at three urban schools located in a low socioeconomic status (SES) area in Toronto. There is consensus in the literature that student engagement plays a central role in their education process. Klem and Connell (2004), for example, noted that engaged students tend to earn higher grades, perform better on tests, and drop out at lower rates, while lower levels of engagement place students at risk for negative outcomes such as poor attendance, disruptive classroom behavior, and leaving school early (cf. Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Harris, 2008, 2010; Libbey, 2004). But defining the concept of engagement is problematic, because of the diversity in understandings of engagement and how to facilitate it. Accordingly, it is important to investigate how practitioners define and facilitate engagement (Harris, 2010). In our work with teachers and administrators in three schools located in a low SES area in Toronto, we investigated two research questions:

1. What are the teachers' conceptions of student engagement?
2. How do teachers' conceptions of student engagement influence their pedagogy?

Conceptions of Student Engagement

The literature abounds with definitions of student engagement. In a recent review of the literature on student engagement, Appleton et al. (2008) identified more than 15 different names and definitions and numerous models of student engagement. These models highlight the multidimensional nature of engagement, but they differ widely in terms of how they describe its components and structure. Based on an extensive review of the literature, Fredericks et al. (2004) identified three components of student engagement: behavioral, emotional and cognitive. Behavioral engagement concerns student participation in academic, social and extracurricular activities, and is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out. Emotional engagement concerns students' positive and negative reactions to teachers, peers, learning and school. Emotional engagement is also presumed to create ties to an institution and influence students' willingness to work. Cognitive engagement is thought to be present when students make personal investment in learning, such as exhibiting a desire to go beyond the requirements and a preference for challenge. According to Fredericks et al., each dimension of engagement can vary in terms of intensity and duration (cf. Appleton et al., 2008). For example, cognitive engagement can range from simple memorization to the use of self-regulated learning strategies that promote deep understanding and expertise. Another model of engagement proposed by Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair, and Lehr (2004) consists of four components: behavioral, cognitive, psychological and academic. The first three correspond to the behavioral, cognitive and emotional dimensions identified by Fredericks et al. Academic engagement concerns the time spent doing learning activities as opposed to general behavioral engagement where students may be participating in non-academic pursuits.

Generally, models of student engagement tend to emphasize the psychological and behavioral dimensions of the concept (e.g., Christenson et al., 2008), but they differ in terms of how they conceptualize the relationships between the different components they propose. Some authors argue that the various components are equally important (e.g., Fredericks et al., 2004), while others argue that there is a hierarchical relationship among them, with some components (e.g., cognitive and emotional engagement) being more important than others (e.g., behavioral engagement) (e.g., Finn, 1989; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

Zyngier (2008) critiqued definitions of engagement that emphasize the psychological and behavioral aspects of the concept because they view student engagement as “something students *do* and that teachers can *organize for them*” (p. 1769). Zyngier argued that these definitions (a) locate engagement and its concurrent academic success in the individual, (b) separate it from the students’ socio-political and cultural contexts and ethnic and economic status (social class) and, consequently, (c) sanction the identification of individual characteristics as the sole determinants of engagement. To enhance student engagement and academic performance, from this perspective, all we need to do is to “improve” students and schools by, for example, making schools “more effective” and students “behave.” Zyngier questioned this belief and, citing research (e.g., Marks, 2000) that shows that socioeconomic status consistently predicts engagement, argued, “engagement must not be disconnected from time, place and space” (p. 1772). Zyngier went on to argue that “historically the disengaged were those whose appearance, language, culture, values, communities and family structures were in contradiction to the dominant (white, middle class) culture that schools were designed to serve and support” (p. 1774). As a result, Zyngier urged researchers to explore the ways that social class, gender, race, ethnicity, power, history and, particularly, students’ lived experiences and social reality, affect student engagement in learning.

Little or no attention, however, has been given in the literature to the social and cultural dimensions of student engagement and how students’ experiences outside the school can influence their engagement in learning. Additionally, as Fredericks et al. (2004) noted, most research on engagement was conducted with White middle-class samples. Given the diversity in student population, the growing literature on disengagement among minority youth, and the obstacles that many minority youth face in school, Fredericks et al. called for more research on engagement among students from various ethnic and racial groups, and social classes, and the various individual and contextual factors that can influence their engagement in learning.

In addition to defining student engagement, a major focus in the literature on student engagement has been on identifying the precedents and outcomes of student engagement and disengagement. As noted above, this research has shown the important role that student engagement plays in the education process (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredericks et al., 2004; Libbey, 2004; Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005). However, while most researchers recognize that engagement is a function of both individual and contextual factors (e.g., Fredericks et al., 2004), the literature tends to focus mostly on the roles of school, classroom and student factors, such as school disciplinary practices, classroom structure, and students’ individual needs and self-efficacy beliefs (Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004; Juvonen, 2007; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2003; Marks, 2000; Sharkey, Sukkyung, & Schnoebelen, 2008). Fredericks et al. (2004), for example, recognized that family, community, culture and educational context influence student engagement, but only reviewed research on the impact of school-level factors (e.g., school size, disciplinary practices, evaluation practices) and classroom context (e.g., teacher support, classroom structure, task characteristics) on student engagement, and how individual needs (e.g., for relatedness and autonomy) mediate the relationship between the classroom context and student engagement. This research suggests that, in general, the degree to which students perceive that the classroom context meets their needs determines how engaged or disaffected they will be in school.

Another line of research has focused on identifying interventions and strategies to facilitate student engagement in learning (e.g., Ross, Bondy, Gallingane, & Hambacher, 2008; Simon, Naylor, Keogh, Maloney, & Downing, 2008; Martin, 2008). Based on a review of the literature,

Harris (2010) listed four main strategies to enhance student engagement: (a) developing student skills so students can be successful; (b) improving curriculum and pedagogy; (c) building student relationships with teachers and other adults in the community; and (d) creating community programs to meet students' physical and psychological needs. However, there is disagreement on how these different strategies work and are implemented. For example, improving curriculum and pedagogy is open to various interpretations.

Methodologically, previous research has relied heavily on quantitative measures of student engagement (e.g., surveys, observation checklists) (e.g., Appleton, Christenson, & Kim, 2006; Greene et al., 2004; Libbey, 2004; Marks, 2000; Sharkey et al., 2008; Spanjers, Burns, & Wagner, 2008). As Harris (2008) argued, while such research has highlighted the importance of engagement in education, it "cannot be used to explain how people make sense of this concept" (p. 60). Because teachers have a significant effect on students' learning and engagement in the classroom, it is important that we examine how teachers think about student engagement, the factors they think influence student engagement, and the strategies they use to facilitate student engagement in the classroom.

Harris (2008, 2010) demonstrated the value of such research in two phenomenographic studies. In the first study, Harris (2008), using in-depth interviews, identified six qualitatively different ways that secondary school teachers understand student engagement: (a) behaving, such as participating in classroom activities and following school rules; (b) being interested in and enjoying participation in what happens at school; (c) being motivated and confident in participation in what happens at school; (d) being involved by thinking; (e) seeing purpose, that is, purposefully learning to reach life goals; and (f) owning and valuing learning. Generally, "teachers become aware of behavioural, then psychological, and finally cognitive aspects of engagement" (p. 74). Additionally, teachers seem to hold diverse understandings of what student engagement means. For example, while some teachers emphasized engagement in learning, others tended to emphasize participation, or engaging students in schooling.

In the second study, Harris (2010) found that teachers hold diverse understandings about how to facilitate student engagement. These understandings fall under three main categories: (a) delivering set activities and discipline to students to promote engagement; (b) modifying curriculum and class activities; and (c) genuine collaboration with students. The last strategy was felt by the participants to lead to the deepest levels of student engagement. While Harris (2008, 2010) provides a good example of an in-depth study of teachers' conceptions of student engagement, her focus was also limited to teacher, student and school factors, and ignored the socio-cultural dimensions and factors that can shape student engagement in learning.

In sum, models of student engagement tend to emphasize the psychological and behavioral dimensions of the concept, focusing on student characteristics and school factors, but ignoring demographic and community factors. Also, most past research has examined student engagement using quantitative measures, resulting in a lack of insight into the ways that people make sense of the concept. This qualitative study starts to address these gaps by examining teachers' ways of making sense of student engagement and considering the role of some social factors, such as social class, in student engagement.

The Study Context

This study is part of a larger project, the School and Community Engaged Education (SCEE) project, aimed at developing and implementing an inclusive, community-engaged curriculum to

enhance student engagement and academic achievement in five schools in the Toronto area. All five schools have high dropout and low achievement rates as measured by standardized tests.¹ The SCEE project, which was initiated in September 2008, was a partnership between the Faculty of Education at York University and a local school board. It included several research and professional development activities (including seminars and conferences) for teachers and community members that were held in the five schools and the university. This current study examined the conceptions of 16 teachers from three of the five schools regarding student engagement (and disengagement). Specifically, we looked for what teachers used as indicators of student engagement (and disengagement); the factors they saw as affecting student engagement; and their attempts at facilitating student engagement.

The SCEE project was set up so that each of the schools was assigned one researcher and one facilitator. The facilitator, a school teacher or administrator on leave from local school boards to teach at the Faculty of Education of York University, was the liaison person between the SCEE project and the participating schools. S/he helped to implement programs that the participating teachers had planned. The researcher was primarily responsible for collecting data from the school participants, and can be described as a participant-observer within the school. In Spring 2009, the SCEE project hosted a professional development event for teachers and administrators from the five schools at the university. During this event, ten focus groups, two for each of the participating schools, were conducted to discuss student engagement at the schools. The goal of these focus groups was to discuss the current situation at the schools, and how teachers understood and were taking up student engagement *before* they engaged in the SCEE project activities. This paper focuses on data from these focus groups.

Method

The Schools

We used data from three of the participating schools for which we had complete data: Devonshire Middle School, Highgate Elementary School, and Kingston Middle School.² The three schools are all located in a north-west neighborhood of Toronto with large proportions of racialized students and immigrant families, and high levels of poverty and violence. The area is considered to be one of Toronto's most "high-risk" areas and is often portrayed negatively in mainstream media (Dippo & James, 2010; Richardson, 2008). Students in the three schools are typically understood to come from low-income families who have to face the reality of crime and violence "in their own backyard." Consequently, these schools often have to deal with students and families who witness violent incidents or are the victims of violence and crime.

The population of each of the three schools reflected that of the neighborhood. For example, Devonshire Middle School serves roughly 700 students in Grades 6, 7, and 8. The majority of the students (90%) are immigrants or have immigrant parents. In 2008-2009, for example, approximately 30% of Devonshire students were of South Asian descent, 30% of Caribbean heritage, and 15% from South American backgrounds. The majority of these students (70%) speak English as a second or additional language. Kingston Middle School serves students in Grades 6 through 8. In 2008-2009, Kingston had 583 students, with the majority (88%) being born in Canada. The remaining students (12%) came from 37 countries (e.g., Guyana, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Jamaica, etc.). More than half of the students (52%) at Kingston had a first language other than English (including Somali, Vietnamese, Tamil, Chinese, Spanish). Highgate

Elementary School serves 376 students in Junior Kindergarten (JK) to Grade 5, with 73% of the students being in JK to Grade 3 (in 2008-2009). Students at Highgate come from 37 countries (e.g., Somalia, Vietnam, West Africa) and represent 23 different languages. More than half of these students (56%) have a first language other than English.³ We were not able to obtain demographic information about the teaching and administration staff at the participating schools, but as scholars (e.g., Dei, 1997; Dei & James, 2002; Dippo & James, 2010) have observed, teachers working in schools in low SES areas in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) tend not to live in these areas and their racial and cultural backgrounds tend to differ from those of their students, with the likelihood of little to no understanding of the realities of their students' lives. That said, various participants informed us that the school board had made efforts to increase the number of racialized teachers on staff in these schools so that, although their percentages did not match the student populations, it was still higher than would be observed in other schools in the school board.

Despite being faced with several challenges, including negative views of the neighborhood and its schools, and being under review by the school board for possible school closure in the coming years, the three schools were striving to engage their students and enhance their academic success. Also significant were the schools' attempts to engage the parents of their students and community members generally. Devonshire administration, for example, has made parent and community engagement a focus for the 2009-2010 school year, and Kingston offered its students a vast array of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, programs and clubs such as tutoring programs, school band, cooking club, chess club, dance club, and various sports clubs. Similarly, Highgate engaged its students through various services and programs, such as Big Brother, Big Sister, and Reading Buddies, as well as several cross-curricular and after-school activities such as tutoring, ballroom dancing, basketball and soccer. These schools' participation in the SCEE project was another aspect of their continuous effort to support their students, and enhance their engagement and academic achievement.

Participants

Sixteen teachers and administrators participated in the focus group sessions.⁴ Five teachers from Devonshire participated in the focus groups, four from Grade 7 and one from Grade 8. The five teachers included: Rishma (the Grade 7 literacy coordinator), Janine (the Grade 7 team leader), Matt (a Grade 7 French teacher), Terrence (a Music teacher), and Geoff (a member of the equity committee at the school). All of the teachers had been working at Devonshire for 2 to 3 years. Five teachers, one administrator and one guidance counselor from Kingston participated in the focus groups: Melanie (a Grade 6-8 Behavioral Class Teacher), Kenisha (a Grade 6-8 Home School Program [HSP] Teacher and a Grade 7 Team Leader), Michelle (a Grade 7 G.I.F.T.E.D. Program Teacher⁵), Latoya (a Grade 6 and 7 Special Education Teacher), Charlaine (a Grade 6-8 French Teacher), Tasha (the Vice Principal), and Kenroy (a Guidance Counselor). Finally, four teachers from Highgate participated in the focus group discussions: John (a French teacher), Smith (a Grade 5 Teacher), Kahn (a Grade 4 Teacher), and Farhan (a Grade 2 Teacher).

Data Collection

The focus group sessions were conducted in the spring of 2009 with four to seven participants

from each of the three schools. Two focus groups were conducted for each school on the same day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Each focus group session lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, and was led by the facilitator and the research assistant associated with the school.

In these focus groups, teachers were asked to: (a) define student engagement and disengagement, and describe indicators of student engagement and disengagement; (b) assess the level of their students' engagement; (c) identify factors (inside and outside the school) that seem to influence their students' engagement; and (d) describe what was being done and what could be done to facilitate student engagement at their schools. Participants were encouraged to provide concrete experiences (e.g., what does student engagement look, taste, smell and feel like?) to illustrate and support their responses to the focus group questions, such as examples of strategies used to enhance student engagement in the classroom, and challenges to keeping students engaged. Focus group sessions were audio taped. These audio files were then shared amongst the research team.

The goal of the focus groups was to explore the views of teachers on student engagement as a group, rather than merely their individual perspective since we wanted to find out how student engagement is understood and approached in the specific context of each school, rather than how individual teachers view engagement. As Mertens (2010) noted, focus groups provide rich insights into how a group of individuals form a schema or perspective of a problem. Consequently, focus groups were conducted separately for each school; but no individual teacher interviews were conducted. This was also reflected in the analyses where we also focused on the views of the whole group, rather than individual teachers.

Data Analysis

The focus group data were analyzed in terms of major themes that were common across the three schools. This was completed in three stages in order to increase the quality of our analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, the researchers listened to the focus group discussions of their assigned schools, noting major themes and transcribing a single quote to illustrate each theme. Next, the entire research team met to discuss the themes that had emerged. Using the representative quotes, the team was able to identify common themes and clarify their meaning. Finally, the researchers went back to the focus group audio files in pairs. Each audio file was examined by one researcher, who identified themes and transcribed representative quotes. It was then examined by a second researcher who verified and/or critiqued the initial analysis. This process resulted in a report for each focus group audio file, which was then shared with the entire research team. In light of this more detailed picture of the data, researchers then reviewed the data once more. This process of de-contextualization and re-contextualization (Tesch, 1990) allowed the research team to form a coherent picture about conceptions of student engagement. In the following section we report the findings in relation to four main areas: (a) how teachers defined and assessed student engagement; (b) factors perceived to influence student engagement; (c) strategies teachers employed to facilitate student engagement; and (d) challenges teachers encountered in facilitating student engagement.

Findings and Discussion

Defining and Assessing Student Engagement

Data from the focus groups indicated that the participants agreed that student engagement in school is critical to the learning/teaching process, but found the concept difficult to define and assess because engagement manifests itself and could be assessed in a variety of ways across students, teachers and classrooms. It was also noted that engagement is highly individualized and context-dependent in terms of how it is performed and perceived. Nevertheless, the participants referred to various ways they define and identify student engagement. We grouped these conceptualizations of engagement into two categories: conventional engagement and contextualized engagement.

Conventional engagement. One indicator of engagement that teachers from all schools mentioned is behavioral, which has to do with the level of student participation in the classroom. John (a teacher from Highgate), for example, defined student engagement as “overwhelming participation” and “excitedly responding to teacher’s questions.” He explained that when he is “able to stir everyone’s interest in [his] lesson, their verbal response indicates their engagement.” Teachers also noted that participation can be “silent” and that some students, particularly students at lower grades and/or who speak English as a second or additional language need more time to process information, and then respond to and participate in class discussions and activities. According to teachers from Devonshire, the experience of student engagement for teachers is intense, polarized between a classroom of extreme quiet and one filled with noise. These teachers noted that a major indicator for student engagement is a lack of behavioral problems.

Contextualized engagement. Other types of students’ behaviors indicated that their engagement in these schools were beyond the traditional dimensions of cognitive, academic and psychological engagement. Kenroy, a guidance counselor from Kingston Middle School, for instance, drew attention to another dimension of student engagement that is not often recognized or valued. He mentioned learning to be responsible as an indicator of engagement. As Kenroy put it:

Some of our kids do a lot of stuff, and they don’t get recognition for it. I see grade 6 kids taking their little brothers to school ...in the morning, and they come late and teachers are on their case, and I’m saying, but they don’t get recognized ... for that.

Obviously, although Kenroy’s intention in highlighting the importance of recognizing lateness as a responsibility is a very good one, his comment raises important questions concerning the role of social class and community ontologies in education. For instance, is this lateness solely about responsibility or is it also about families working together toward survival? In other words, the lateness that Kenroy describes as responsibility may well be a survival strategy for the parents of these students who may be working double or even triple jobs to make ends meet due to low wages, lack of recognition of skills, and other factors that might prevent them from being able to accompany their kids to school on time.

While they reported using various indicators to assess their students’ engagement and described several instances of individual student engagement, participants from the three schools felt that their students were not engaged at the level that as teachers they would like to see. Further, these teachers had difficulty identifying students who were engaged and those who were not. Part of the difficulty is because student engagement is context-dependent and varies across courses, lessons and teachers. Kahn, a Grade 4 teacher at Highgate Elementary School, for example, noted that all students are engaged at some point or another over the period of the

day, the week or month. Kahn felt that engagement is not something that can be assessed at one particular point in time; instead, student engagement should be assessed over a long period of time. For example, she noted that young children are normally shy at the beginning of the year, but “eventually settle down and become engaged.” Another teacher from Highgate Elementary School mentioned that when a musician visited her class to perform West African music, the whole class was engaged throughout the performance, but these same children found it difficult to stay on task during other lessons. The overall picture that emerges from the data is that definitions of student engagement vary greatly across teachers and schools mainly because, as many participants noted, engagement is highly individual and context-dependent in terms of how it is performed by students and perceived by teachers.

Given these data, we take Zyngier’s (2008) point that student engagement is a concept that needs to be contextualized to have meaning. Boisterous behavior can be an indication of engagement or not. Lateness or silence can be an indication of disengagement or not. The categories described in the literature seem too simplistic to capture the reality of student engagement in context. In sum, the teachers seemed to view student engagement as much more than a function of the individual student. Indeed, they were quick to identify several factors that seem to shape student engagement.

Factors Perceived to Influence Student Engagement

The participants mentioned various factors that influence their students’ engagement in learning. These factors relate to the curriculum, the school, and the students’ community and families. As noted in the literature review above, the literature tends to focus on the student, class and school levels. The teachers in this study referred to these three factors as well, but they also emphasized factors that go beyond the individual student and the school, factors that seem to play a major role in student engagement at these particular schools yet tended to be ignored in the literature.

The main factors that the participants believed significantly influence student engagement at their schools were: (a) the degree to which the curriculum reflects the culturally diverse student population in the schools; (b) social problems, particularly violence that had disruptive effects on the community and the school; and (c) the level and nature of parental involvement.

Curricular relevance. A major school factor that seemed to affect student engagement significantly concerns the curriculum. Teachers from Highgate Public School, for example, noted that many children “do not see themselves in the curriculum” and, consequently, do not make connections to or fully participate in the education process. While teachers endeavored to make the curriculum more relevant to students and their lives, lack of resources, time restrictions, and other factors to be discussed below, work against such endeavors. The two factors that received most attention in the focus groups, however, were related to the community and to parent engagement.

Social problems. The problems of students coming to classes tired and hungry were identified by a number of teachers. However, violence was identified as a major social problem that was having a detrimental effect on the schooling and education of students. Participants from Highgate Elementary School, for example, noted that their students often have to deal with violent incidents in their neighborhoods, and that this significantly affected their social, emotional and cognitive engagement and development. They noted that after the shooting (outside the school) of a 15-year old student who attended the school, many students were upset

and needed counseling. That counseling was to help the students, as in their many other experiences with violence, deal with the fear, hatred and aggression, which they often felt through violence and from which they often take weeks to recover. Similarly, participants from Kingston Middle School suggested that the prevalence of violence within the neighborhood was also felt by many of their students. Melanie, a Grade 6-7 teacher, referenced one student who had "witnessed four murders already in the neighborhood." Having to deal with these incidents when they occurred often meant that teachers had to dramatically change their lesson focus and plans. Charlene, a Grade 6-8 French teacher, told the following story of how violence in the community, which contributed to fear among students, caused her to change what she did in the classroom:

When [the students] come they will say you know there was a killing on [street name]. You know, you have your lesson planned, but somebody got shot on the weekend. We drop everything; we talk about it; and then when we finish talking about it ... one boy was saying, out of the blue ... "I hope I will live to be old. But I'm afraid, I'm afraid." And then another boy said "I'm afraid too. But we gotta just pray that God will protect us. These people go to church to pray that God will protect us but ya he does protect us. But either way we have to pray, but don't go where you're not supposed to be." So you use that now to teach another thing, you know.

Parental involvement. Parent involvement in their children's education was another recurrent theme in the focus group discussions. Teachers from Highgate Elementary School emphasized the importance of parents' involvement in their children's education for promoting student engagement. They cited several factors that inhibit such involvement. In particular, they observed that many parents do not speak English fluently and, as a result, are too intimidated or feel unqualified to make any contributions to their children's education, specifically, assisting their children with schoolwork. Also contributing is the fact that many parents tended to work more than one job to survive and this meant that they were never available to come to school. Cultural beliefs, such as "education is the job of the teacher," were also identified as a factor, which prevented some parents from getting involved in school affairs. In addition, because policies related to parent involvement are often not clear, some parents felt that going to the school might be perceived as "overstepping" the school's borders.

Devonshire Middle School teachers agreed that students were more likely to succeed when their parents were involved in their education. However, they also expressed discontent with the level of parental engagement in their school. Similar to the Highgate Elementary School teachers, those at Devonshire attributed the low level of parental involvement in their school to parents' work schedules, parents' lack of understanding of how to engage with their children's education, and the school's lack of respect for what parents have to offer. It was hypothesized that low parental involvement in schools, particularly the low parent turnout at the few parent-focused events, might be due to the school's poor parent outreach efforts. Devonshire teachers further suggested that because information about school events is in English, parents were unlikely to know about the events. The teachers contended that insofar as the school often appears an unwelcoming location for parents, it hinders their engagement in the schools, resulting in an overall poor school-parent/community relationship. Janine, a teacher at Devonshire, commented:

I find that as professionals we don't welcome, respect and reach out to the parent community as we

should, on every single level, on a daily basis. I am so disappointed... I know we have a very resourceful parent-community... I know that some of our parents—the ones who do not speak English as a first language—are very intimidated.

Janine's comment and the points raised above warn against pathologizing parents. For instance, is it possible that parents are not “lacking understanding,” but are misunderstood institutionally or are not provided the platform to be understood? Unfortunately, we did not collect data on parent involvement at the three schools, but it is very likely that they are providing support to their children, but the things that they may be doing might not fit into the traditional ideals of “parental support”. Additionally, given the violence and poverty in the lives of the families of this study, it is possible that these parents are incredibly involved in helping their children, for example, deal with the emotional stress of violence, use strategies to stay safe in the face of violence, and learn how to ration food to get through the day. This, obviously, highlights the need to deconstruct traditional notions of parental involvement and parental participation in this and other contexts in order to recognize and respect diverse approaches to parental involvement.

Strategies Teachers Employ to Facilitate Student Engagement

As discussed above, the participants identified three of the general factors that influence their students' engagement in school: the curriculum, parental engagement, and community violence. Only the curriculum was perceived as within their control. In this regard, they employed strategies to build relationships and trust with students as a way to engage them. In this section we discuss how participating teachers talked about these strategies.

In order to enhance their students' engagement, participants focused on strategies designed to improve relationships with their students, parents and the community. They also saw pedagogical strategies such as culturally specific curricula, incorporating students' personal issues in the classroom, and having teachers participate in and engage with educational material as means by which they might enhance student engagement in their schooling. In what follows we discuss these strategies under five headings: building relationships, building relevance, building enthusiasm, building trust and collaboration, and building connection between community and school life.

Building relationships. As part of their strategy for enhancing student engagement, Highgate Elementary School teachers mentioned that they sought to build positive relationships between themselves and their students and their parents. They emphasized the importance of providing students with a safe space to express themselves, valuing students' contributions in class, and encouraging and complementing students. Highgate Grade 4 teacher, Kahn, noted that “making meaningful compliments does affect children; they feel better and more positive when they receive a sincere compliment.” Farhan, a Grade 2 teacher, added that “[some] students are extremely shy to present in front of others, to talk about their feelings,” but they are at the same time eager to participate when they are given the opportunity and are sure of their responses. Farhan described how she allows students to vote for the student of the week, while Kahn allows her students to decide on which events students want to celebrate. These strategies were felt to have allowed students to voice their opinions and to have contributed to the teachers' ability to include events that were relevant to students.

Teachers from Kingston Middle School emphasized the importance of showing their “human

side,” or “the teacher as a person,” in the classroom by sharing personal stories and acting less as an authority figure and more as a “regular person.” As Kenisha, a Grade 6-8 teacher and Grade 7 team leader, explained:

Sometimes we need to draw on our own experiences, use our own experiences and show them that we might not have grown up in a violent situation, but there were hardships. There were times where we suffered hardships our whole lives too, you understand me? So sometimes teachers use our own self as examples to show them that ... I used to tell them that ... I used to walk to and from school every day ... And that is not a short walk. You guys live down the street, one bus stop and you're late, you know.

Michelle, a Grade 7 teacher, described how an overnight trip for students and teachers had a positive impact on the relationship between teachers and students. She described how the trip allowed the students to see teachers “out of the [school] building and in everyday life” (“wearing pajamas” and “eating breakfast”). Michelle referred to this experience as one in which the students came to “trust” their teachers and to see “teachers as human.” Michelle explained:

When we were eating breakfast, the [hotel] staff asked us to serve the oatmeal because [the students] have a relationship with us. They don't know oatmeal, so I feel like when I was serving it, they were like “Ms. [teacher's name] is serving oatmeal, it must be okay, let me try it.” And they tried it because it was a teacher they trust.

Building relevance. Another theme that emerged in relation to facilitating student engagement is the need for teachers to build relevance. Teachers from Highgate Elementary School agreed that drawing social and cultural connections to the students' lives within the curriculum facilitates student engagement. One strategy to link the curriculum to students' lives was described by Farhan who reported that each school year started by marking every student's country of origin on a map, and then discussing the differences and similarities between students with the class. This map is then revisited throughout the year to remind everyone of their diverse backgrounds. According to Farhan, acknowledging the diverse backgrounds of her students allowed her to celebrate many of their strengths that might otherwise be overlooked within a dominant-culture-focused curriculum. Another teacher encourages students to share pictures and stories about their vacations. It was felt that these experiences acknowledge students' individuality and create opportunities for everyone to contribute. Kenisha, a Grade 6-8 teacher, described how she allows students to express themselves and their culture in order to enhance their self-confidence and engagement. She encouraged a shy student to express herself through dancing and that experience “changed everything” for the student.

I said, “you have to do that dance, you have to do that dance,” and she said, “No Miss, I won't.” And one day we had a celebration at school and I said, “I'm putting your name down for that dance” ... Very quiet kid and tall, and she got up and she danced, and I mean she tore the house apart because nobody in the school knew that she could dance like that. I mean it was so professional ... It's a part of her mother's culture. She was born in Canada, but her parents think it's important ... She had the audience in hush because everybody was shocked. They didn't know she had that, you understand me? It just changed her whole thing. It changed everything for her. She'd start talking, she'd start socializing more, I mean, it changed everything.

Building enthusiasm. The participants also discussed strategies related to teaching methods, classroom management and the curriculum as ways to enhance their students' enthusiasm in learning and, consequently, their engagement. Teachers from Highgate Elementary School agreed on several ways to engage students: getting children to work in small groups or in pairs, using hands on activities, providing clear instructions, having the teacher participate in activities with students, and assigning challenging but achievable tasks that help promote students' self-esteem.

In order to maintain student engagement, teachers from Devonshire Middle School expressed a need to impose high levels of classroom management, constantly working to balance the needs of those students who are moving forward in the curriculum and the needs of those students who are falling behind. Terrence, a Grade 7 music teacher, for example, noted that it is important for teachers to engage with the curriculum in order to enhance student engagement. He explained that when teachers demonstrate enthusiasm and sincere interest in a topic, students react with higher levels of interest as well. As he put it, when a teacher is really excited about a topic "it rubs off on [the students] and they feed off that." Use of new technological tools (e.g., Smart Boards), and giving students choice and ownership over their learning were other strategies described by the participants as effective ways to engage students. Nonetheless, Janine, a Grade 7 team leader at Devonshire, noted that she is not satisfied with the level of student engagement at her school.

Every time I volunteer to do something with Devonshire students where they choose to do something it's so successful... because *they choose* ... back into the classroom with the same kids, and if they don't see, or they don't choose this experience, it's very hard to get them engaged.

Building trust and collaboration. While curriculum, and teacher behavior and practices in the classroom were a major component of the focus group discussions (as is often the case in the literature, cf. Harris, 2010), the participants also discussed issues and strategies related to community and parent engagement. As noted above, the participants were aware of the challenges and issues in the community (e.g., violence, poverty) that both underlie and undermine all efforts to enhance student engagement and achievement. Consequently, strategies, as well as ideas, on how to engage the students' parents and their community constituted a large part of the focus group discussions.

Teachers from Highgate Elementary School emphasized the importance of connecting with the students' families through social events organized at the school such as social evenings that allow teachers to interact with parents. Additionally, teachers celebrate various festivals in school with parents and students. Building links between the school and home through clear communication was a recurring theme in the discussions among teachers from Highgate. These teachers discussed various ways to engage parents. Farhan emphasized the importance of building trust and constant communication with parents (e.g., when they come to drop off their children at school). Gaining parents' trust and acknowledging their role was proposed as a powerful strategy to get students to feel connected to the school and their teachers, and to involve parents in their children's education. Farhan emphasized that:

You can't get the parents' support without trust. Parents talk outside school and kids get this information from them, so if the parents respect you so will the children. Once parents realize that you have their children's best interest at heart, they will trust you.

Kahn added that she tends to focus on “the good stuff” when talking to parents about their children (“unless it has to do with safety”) in order to engage parents and gain their trust. She believes that “talking about the positive issues and opportunities helps build good relationships. Once you build trust with the parents, you get to know the pressures they are going through and can better understand the stress students bring to school.” Finally, Smith, a Grade 5 teacher, engages parents by involving them in setting goals for their children’s education. Smith noted that parents are often keen on knowing how their children are doing in relation to the goals they have set and this opens a channel between the school and home. Smith, in fact, goes as far as praising parents on their children’s report cards for the work they have done and the impact it is having on their children’s learning and achievement.

Building connection between community and school life. Addressing issues and concerns in the community was another approach that teachers at Kingston Middle School adopted. Kenisha, a Grade 6-8 teacher and a Grade 7 team leader, warned that if teachers try to ignore issues, incidents and events outside the school, they will not be able to implement their lesson plans because:

[Students are] talking to their friends ... and then everybody gets distracted so nobody is paying attention to what you’re doing. But if you deal with it and discuss it with them and say, “alright, how would you, or what did you do, or how would you like me to handle this? Do you want to talk to the boy or whatever [the situation is]?” But if you don’t address it you’ll have no class ... because they’re whispering here, whispering there ... and everybody become distracted.

There was also agreement that if teachers take into consideration students’ lives and the obstacles they are facing, the negative effects of those barriers can be reduced and students can become engaged in the classroom. Melanie, a Grade 6-8 behavioral class teacher, described how she takes into consideration the out-of-school life and experiences of a particular student, who had witnessed more than one murder, in order to increase his alertness and engagement in class. Melanie explained that she gives the student “a chance to sleep because he can’t function.” She would say to the student, “for this period pull two chairs together, take a nap ... half an hour, forty minutes,” and after that “give him something to eat.” As this story shows, it is very challenging for students to be cognitively and emotionally engaged in learning when their basic needs are not met, and/or when they have additional stress from witnessing traumatic incidents within their community. Teachers in these and similar cases have to adopt different roles and strategies than those often thought of as part of regular teaching tasks.

Finally, violence in the community has led teachers to discuss community-related issues both to reduce the stigma associated with being a member of that community and to engage students. Michelle, a Grade 7 teacher, described how her students are amazed that she is not afraid to walk in the community, and explained that by walking in the community and talking about “what’s going on in their community,” she is able to show students that there is nothing to be afraid or ashamed of about their community. Teachers from Devonshire Middle School mentioned several strategies to address social issues as they arise in the classroom and in the media. These strategies included humor, light sarcasm, and open dialogue. Devonshire teachers also agreed that attending to students’ out-of-school interests allows students to feel more engaged with school, making the classroom a location of development and understanding for issues that are relevant to the students’ lives. Students’ hallway conversations often spillover into the classroom and teachers who ignore these concerns lose students’ attention because their

personal issues are, in that moment, more important than the lesson plan. Terrence, a Grade 7 teacher, noted that:

If there's no personal connection, [students] don't want to hear anything ... I'll have kids come into my room and say "Mr. [teacher name] this just happened" ... and you have to stop the lesson to deal with them because if you don't, they're not going to be focusing on the lesson ... that connection leads to no misbehaving, leads to them sitting down and engaging in your lessons.

Once issues of interest to students are addressed and turned into "teachable moments", students are more inclined to focus on "work". This is a theme that was raised by participants from all three schools and shows how the distinction between "school work" and the out-of-school concerns and realities of the students is often blurred. Teachers felt that in order to engage students and to be able to teach the formal curriculum, they needed to address and connect students' lives and concerns with that curriculum. By addressing students' concerns, teachers felt that they were also teaching social justice, critical analysis, and other skills. Several of the teachers from Devonshire agreed that starting a class by asking the students what *they* wanted to talk about contributed to building a trusting relationship of mutual respect and reciprocity between teacher and students. By understanding what students are going through, teachers can get much more from them in terms of respect and focus, and students are more inclined to hear what teachers have to say.

In summary, the participants described a wide range of strategies to enhance their students' engagement. These strategies focus primarily on the student, the teacher and the classroom through improving student-teacher relationships, incorporating out-of-school issues in the curriculum and the classroom, and having teachers show engagement with educational material. The participants also described strategies to improve the relationships between teachers, parents and the community. However, a common theme in the focus group discussions is that these efforts tended to be isolated, reactive and, often, have superficial outcomes, in contrast to adopting a global approach that links the school and the community, and integrates students' out-of-school life and concerns in the curriculum in more meaningful ways.

Challenges

Teachers from Highgate Elementary School felt that although their efforts have helped bring inclusive practices to the school, they still need support and professional development in this area both from within and outside their school. In particular, getting other teachers from the same school on board has proven to be a difficult task. Changes in the administration have also hindered the continuity of efforts to engage students and their parents. Finally, curriculum demands and standardized tests (e.g., EQAO⁶) limit the teachers' ability to engage students as teachers often "struggle to fit everything in [their] day."

The diversity of the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the students and their parents also adds another layer of difficulty to engaging students. Devonshire Middle School teachers noted that, given the diverse cultural make-up of the students, it is often difficult to meet the needs of all students and, therefore, it is equally difficult to keep all students engaged and interested in school-wide activities. Differences in language at times become a barrier to communication and engagement. This has been the case when it comes to engaging parents with teachers and the school. For example, parents' representation in Parents' Councils in Highgate

has been limited to some dominant cultures. A major challenge for teachers in all three schools has been how to reach out to all parents. A main reason for this situation, as noted above, is that many parents do not feel the need and/or are not able to participate fully in their children's education because of linguistic, cultural, economic, social or administrative reasons (e.g., having more than one job, cultural beliefs about the role of parents in their children's education, and unclear school policies and communication about parents' roles).

Discussion and Implications

It is clear that student engagement is a complex concept that can be used to frame teachers' interactions with students, classroom management, curriculum implementation, communication with parents, and inclusive practices in the broader school community. The teachers in this study had robust ideas about student engagement, yet they still began with an individual focus rather than a structural one. That is, while they were aware of the issues that affected their students' engagement that related to their low SES and to violence in the community, they regarded these issues in terms of how individual students, parents and teachers reacted to this structure, instead of considering in any substantive way strategies to address these issues at the school and community levels. In other words, their approach to student engagement was individual, isolated and reactive rather than broad and proactive.

Issues of power were nowhere to be found in their discussion, a finding in line with Zyngier's (2008) critique of previous studies on student engagement. This may have been because of the teachers' beliefs about their roles and/or because they feel they lack control over these factors. Teaching, after all, is an already intense profession, and the complications associated with a linguistically and ethnically diverse student population in a low-income and high-crime neighborhood add another layer of complexity. The idea of teachers working with students and their parents and community to intervene in the circumstances of their lives in order to change them is the ideal; however it may be unsustainable without the material and temporal support of the school board (Barrett, Ford & James, 2010).

An understanding of the conceptions that teachers hold about student engagement is crucial to understand why they choose to use particular strategies to enhance it. It also points to the ways that the structure of schooling may work against teachers' efforts. The Ontario Ministry of Education's mandated standardized tests and learning goals do not take into account the diversity of students or the unique challenges faced by individual students in varying contexts. The teachers in our study were keenly aware of the competing demands between mandated curricula, culturally relevant curricula, and the lack of time and resources to reconcile them. Such barriers are structural ones, and it is unrealistic to expect individual teachers to deal with them on a sustained basis without support.

This study highlights the importance of researching teachers' conceptions of student engagement and how to facilitate it, as these conceptions have important implications for teachers' pedagogical approaches and interactions with students inside and outside the classroom. As with any research, there were limitations to the present study. First, we did not examine how participants attained these conceptions of student engagement or how these conceptions vary depending on the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic background of these teachers. Both questions are worth exploring in future studies. Future research needs to examine the origins and development of such conceptions over time, and how they are related to individual and context characteristics (of school, teachers, community, etc.). Our research is

significant because it deals with teachers in an ethnically diverse population within socioeconomically challenged neighborhoods, but it only scratches the surface of the influence of such factors. Nevertheless, the findings of this study have several important implications for practice and policy. First, it is clear that teachers need support to be able to enhance student engagement. Such support can take the form of teacher training and professional development activities, critical discussions among teachers and with other stakeholders (e.g., community organizations, parents) of issues in the community, more meaningful interactions between schools and their communities, and collaborations between teachers and among teachers and other stakeholders. There is also a need for a more meaningful integration of out-of-school issues and concerns in the curriculum (rather than superficial and reactive mention of these issues in some class discussions). Most importantly, there is a need to rethink the link between the school, including the curriculum, and the social and material realities of its community in order to make the curriculum more relevant and inclusive.

The SCEE project provides an example of an endeavor to address some of these needs (see also Barrett et al. 2010; Samaroo, Dahya & Alidina, 2013). As a university-school board partnership, the SCEE project provides a greater chance of providing structural support for teachers' efforts in improving student engagement at the three schools. Also, the structure of the SCEE project allows for the facilitator working with each school to introduce and promote a broader discussion of student engagement, one that emphasizes the importance of critical discussion of the larger social context of the school community. It also provides a space for the university to work with the school board to provide the funding and resources necessary to work with the surrounding community to lobby for their own interests (related to, for example, the crime rate, transportation, settlement services, etc.). Thus, the teachers in our study recognized that while student engagement is a symptom displayed by individuals, they also realized that the roots of the problem lay elsewhere. However, by the same token, we as researchers need to recognize that the ways in which teachers conceptualize student engagement are also symptoms of a larger structural problem that stems from the ways in which the school system is designed to be generic and thus isolated from the unique communities surrounding each of its schools.

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Notes

- 1 We refer to standardized tests as one indicator of achievement in this paper, but we recognize their limitations in terms of how they define and assess school achievement.
- 2 Pseudonyms are used to refer to participating schools and teachers throughout the paper.
- 3 This information was obtained from school profiles posted on each of the school's websites for the 2008-2009 school year. However, to maintain confidentiality of the schools, data sources are not included.
- 4 Only teachers who agreed or were able to attend the focus group sessions were included in the study.
- 5 Goals, Instruction, Fun, Teaching, Empowerment, Differentiated Instruction Program.
- 6 EQAO is the Education Quality and Accountability Office.

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