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Strategies for academic engagement perceived by Finnish sixth and eighth graders

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Abstract

This study explores strategies students use to construct their academic engagement in the social environment of school. The study is based on group interview data collected from 161 sixth (78) and eighth (83) grade students. Students reflected both engaging and disengaging episodes. Data were content analysed. The results show that students reported using only confirming strategies in teacher–student interaction. More diverse strategies were described in relation to peer interaction. The results indicated that simultaneously maintaining functional peer relations and engaging effectively in academic activities is a highly challenging task, which requires strategic flexibility and self-regulative skills. In terms of the development of more engaging learning environments for students, our results suggest that more attention should be paid to creating positive opportunities to participate, in terms of both academic activities and peer interaction.

Keywords: academic engagement, social strategies, teacher–student interaction, peer interaction

Introduction

It has been suggested that academic engagement is a key to successful study. Engaged students have been found to consider schoolwork meaningful (Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson & Perry, 2006), receive higher grades (Ladd & Dinella, 2009; Wang & Eccles, 2012) and remain more persistent when encountering problems during their school careers than students who suffer from disengagement in their studies (Sharkey, You & Schnoebelen, 2008). Research on school engagement indicates that most students engage in academic activities successfully throughout their school career (Jimerson, Egeland & Teo, 1999; Li & Lerner, 2011). However, some students face severe problems, which even tend to increase through their school career (e.g. Archambault, Janosz, Fallu & Pagani, 2009; Li & Lerner, 2011). It has been suggested in particular that school transitions – such as that which in Finland takes place between grades six and seven – provide challenges to students' academic engagement (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000; Salmela-Aro, Kiuru & Nurmi, 2008).

Research on academic engagement has identified various environmental and individual factors contributing to students' academic engagement, such as student characteristics, for example self-efficacy and fear of academic failure (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke & Hall, 2003; McClelland & Morrison, 2003), family background (Marks, 2000), and the demography of schools and neighbourhoods (Chavous, Rivas-Drake, Smalls, Griffin & Cogburn, 2008). Within school, teachers (Patrick, Ryan & Kaplan, 2007; Anderson, Christenson, Sinclair & Lehr, 2004) and peers (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Guay, Boivin & Hodges, 1999; Sage & Kindermann, 1999) have been found to have an especially significant effect on students' academic engagement. Less is, however, known about the kinds of strategies students use to engage in academic activities in the school social environment. This study focuses on exploring strategies used by sixth and eighth graders in episodes that engage and disengage them from the academic activities provided by school.

Academic engagement

Academic engagement refers to students' active involvement in schoolwork (Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Jimerson, Campos & Greif, 2003; Skinner, Kindermann & Furrer, 2009). It has been suggested that it consists of *behavioural*, *cognitive* and *emotional* dimensions (e.g. Fredericks et al., 2004; Sharkey et al., 2008). Behavioural engagement consists of students' active involvement in learning and academic tasks, including behaviour such as effort, persistence and concentration, asking questions and contributing to class discussion (e.g. Archambault et al., 2009; Jimerson, et al., 2003). Cognitive engagement refers to the student's personal investment in learning activities, including self-regulation, thoughtfulness and willingness to exert effort for schoolwork as well as the use of various approaches to learning (e.g. Ladd & Dinella, 2009). The affective factors of engagement, such as enjoyment, happiness, anxiety or boredom, support and belonging, and attitudes towards schoolwork, constitute the emotional dimension of academic engagement (e.g. Finn, 1989).

While engaging in the learning experience is characterised by absorption, vigour and dedication, or even flow experience (Csikszentmihályi, 2005), disengagement is characterised by low energy, reduced involvement and experiences of inefficacy (Skinner et al., 2009). Academic engagement or the lack of it has been shown to have a significant impact on educational outcomes. High levels of academic engagement have been found to be a predictor not only for student academic performance (Wang & Holcombe, 2010) but also for their well-being (Pyhäntö, Soini & Pietarinen, 2010) and affirmative long-term development in their academic lives. There is evidence that academically engaged students are willing to invest time and effort in their studies and are likely to be efficient and persistent in dealing with the demands of study (Wang & Eccles, 2012). This is likely to promote further engagement in academic activities and protect students from negative states, such as exhaustion, that might lead to study burnout (Hakanen, Bakker & Schaufeli, 2006). In turn, students who suffer from reduced engagement have been found to run a greater risk of alienation and dropout (Finn, 1989).

Academic engagement is regulated by complex dynamics

Prior research on academic engagement has shown that various individual and environmental factors contribute to student involvement in academic activities (Caraway et al., 2003; Jimerson et al., 1999; You & Sharkey, 2009). For example, self-regulated learning (McClelland & Morrison, 2003; Pintrich & Groot, 1990), mastery goal orientation (Caraway et al., 2003) and good social skills (McClelland & Morrison, 2003; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997) have been found to contribute to academic engagement. In turn, students with adult responsibilities (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002), students who have repeated a year (Roderick, Nagaoka, Bacon & Easton, 2000) and students who have been transferred between schools (Swanson & Schneider, 1999) are more likely to suffer from disengagement and to drop out of school. A critical phase on the school path is a transition from primary to secondary school. In transitions students meet both contextual and developmental changes, which are intertwined with the expression of physical, psychological and social changes and challenges (Anderson et al., 2000; Ellonen, Kääriäinen, & Autio, 2008; Gillison et al., 2008; Jindal-Snape & Miller, 2008). Social relationships within school with teachers, other staff members and peers have been suggested to have an especially significant impact on students' academic engagement (Pietarinen, Soini & Pyhältö, 2014; Wentzel, 1998). Furrer and Skinner (2003), for instance, found that students who felt appreciated by teachers were more likely to display greater behavioural and emotional engagement in academic activities. Moreover, having positive relationships with teachers has been associated with a more positive affect towards schoolwork and putting more effort into studying (Patrick et al., 2007; Anderson et al., 2004). On the other hand, lack of experienced teacher support and constructive feedback have been related to reduced levels of engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004) and even school dropout (Farrell, 1990).

Students' relationships with peers have also been shown to matter in terms of their academic engagement. The evidence on the effect of peer relationships on academic engagement is, however, contradictory (You, 2011). For example, satisfaction in school, socially appropriate behaviour and academic effort have been associated with positive relationships with peers at school (Wentzel, Barry & Caldwell, 2004). Moreover, higher levels of engagement in schoolwork have been reported to result

from students actively discussing ideas, debating points of view and giving feedback from each other's work. In contrast, students who are less liked by peers have been found to have lower classroom participation and are less involved at school and experience less interest in schoolwork (Buhs & Ladd, 2001; Guay et al., 1999). Study burnout (Kiuru, Aunola, Nurmi, Leskinen & Salmela-Aro, 2008) and negative behaviour in terms of schoolwork have also been found to accumulate in close peer relationships. Sage and Kindermann (1999), for example, found that children who associated with others who were more disengaged and disaffected from academic activities became more disaffected themselves. Zimmer-Gembeck, Chipuer, Hanisch, Creed & McGregor (2006) argued that peer relationships may only be associated with positive academic outcomes when these relationships increase school connection. The findings suggest that student engagement in academic activities, or the lack of it, is regulated by complex dynamics between the student and their learning environment rather than by single personal or environmental attributes.

Strategies of academic engagement

The dynamics between the student and their learning environment are highly regulated by the practices of the school community, and the ways in which students participate in the practices. During their school career – and indeed during a single school day – students are exposed to various sub-cultures and expectations (Pyhältö et al., 2010). Students participate in a variety of pedagogical interactions and activities, engage with different kinds of peer group and adopt various roles in the school's dynamic, complex and multi-layered community of practice (Pyhältö, Ahonen, Pietarinen & Soini, 2011). There is evidence that pedagogical practices requiring students' own initiative and complex problem-solving are likely to promote meaningful learning (Gillies & Ashman, 2003; Prince, 2004). Students, however, not only are influenced by the variety of practices provided by the school environment but they can also, at least to some extent, choose their primary arenas of participation. Students may assume various strategies to engage in the practices: they can, for instance, adopt, adapt or protest against them. Hence, by adopting different strategies students can modify their environment and their opportunities to engage in school activities (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, Soini & Westling, 2011). For example, the use of optimistic

and task-focused strategies has been shown to be related to academic engagement and school achievement (Mäkikangas & Kinnunen, 2003; Salmela-Aro, Toivanen & Nurmi, 2009).

There is also evidence that using available social resources is related to higher achievement scores among students (Leana, 2011). This suggests that using active and social strategies can be beneficial in improving academic engagement. Optimistic social strategies promote social efficacy beliefs, which are likely to increase persistence in the face of challenges (Baumeister, Campbell, Kruger & Vohs, 2003). Furthermore, positive emotions are thought to promote a more flexible use of strategies (Fredrickson, 2001) and willingness to try out innovative ideas to solve problems (Lyubomirsky, King & Diener, 2005; Järvenoja & Järvelä, 2009) and hence facilitate learning and a more positive affect. Positive participation is likely to elicit supportive responses from teachers and peers, further contributing to a student's learning outcomes (Hughes & Kiwok, 2006; Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck & Connell, 1998) by promoting the student's confidence in their abilities and increasing their willingness to participate in future classroom activities (e.g. You, 2011). In turn, dysfunctional strategies such as task avoidance and withdrawal may decrease student self-efficacy, which can in turn reduce academic engagement (Langelaan, Bakker, van Doornen & Schaufeli, 2006). The findings suggest that not only the pedagogical practices adopted by teachers but also the strategies used by students contribute to the latter's engagement in the academic activities provided by school. Yet, we know surprisingly little about how students themselves perceive strategies for engaging in the academic activities provided by school.

Aims of the study

This study aims to improve understanding of the construction of students' academic engagement by exploring what kind of strategies students use to engage in the academic activities provided by school. The focus is on exploring the strategies embedded in the social interactions of school perceived by students in two age groups near the transition. The following research questions are addressed:

1) What kinds of strategies do sixth and eighth graders report use in academically engaging and disengaging events and episodes embedded in social interactions of school community?

2) Are there differences between the strategies reported by sixth and eighth graders?

Methods

Finnish comprehensive school system as educational context

Finnish children's school career typically starts with pre-primary school (not compulsory) at the age of six. At the age of seven the children start compulsory comprehensive school, which includes the primary (grades 1–6) and secondary (grades 7–9) school phases. Until the age of 16, all Finnish children receive a similar basic education. Education is publicly funded, and include daily school dinners and health services such as dental care. There are no ability-tracking structures or other structures that separate comprehensive school students early on into either academic or vocational education. Moreover there are flexible accountability structures that place a strong emphasis on trusting schools and teachers (Aho, Pitkänen & Sahlberg, 2006). Support systems are also flexible and half of the students who complete comprehensive school have received special education at some point in their school career (Sahlberg, 2011). Finnish culture of education put a lot of emphasis on trust, autonomy and responsibility. In spite of growing cultural diversity and differences in family demographics in terms of educational background and income, Finnish schools differ rather little in learning outcomes and student's experienced well-being compared with schools in other countries (OECD, 2007; Salmela-Aro et al., 2008). Low child poverty, early childhood support and intervention systems, free public schooling for everyone and a strong welfare system supporting families provide fairly equal opportunities for every child in their early school career (Sahlberg, 2011).

Finnish teachers are well educated (with a Master's degree) and put a lot of emphasis on supporting students with special needs. Since 1998, parents have had the right to choose their children's school, but most parents still prefer to send them to the local school. Although the Finnish educational system

is considered homogeneous, there is variation within schools in terms of students' school attitude, performance and well-being. In most schools there are a large number of students who do well in an academic, social and psychological sense, but also some students who are disconnected from the academic track or social community of the school (Sahlberg, 2011; Salmela-Aro et al., 2008).

Participants

This study comprises data collected around Finland from the students of three compulsory comprehensive schools. One of the schools was a primary school including grades 1–6 and two of them were schools including both primary and secondary level, grades from 1 to 9. (Also in the 1-9 schools students go through a transition when they enter the secondary level, for example their classmates and teachers change.) The schools are very typical Finnish schools situated in the suburban areas. Sizes of the selected three case schools varied from 345 students to 650. All the sixth (78) and eighth (83) grade pupils from the case schools were interviewed, comprising altogether 161 pupils (girls: 54% and boys: 46%). The reason for selecting sixth (age 12–13) and eighth (age 15–16) graders was that they were in the interesting phases of their school career in terms of engagement; one approaching and another recently undergone the primary–secondary school transition (Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittgerber, 2000). Researchers had consent from chief officers of the school districts, schools, and students and their parents for the pupils' participation in the study.

Data collection and interviews

The data were collected by means of small group interviews, 3–5 students in each group. Participation in the study was voluntary, there were no extra credit for participating and interviews were conducted during school days, in the spring of 2011. They lasted from 20 to 60 minutes depending on the students' talkativeness and were carried out without teachers. The interviews were conducted according to the semi-structured framework, in which each student group were asked to describe for example how do students that either do well or worse behave in the school or with peers, what makes a well-adjusted student and what happens in both engaging and disengaging episodes. They were asked to reflect on the social strategies referring to intentional acts of interaction students use with peers, teachers and other

members of the school community, for example an active and participative or more adaptive and passive orientation in school's social situations. Moreover they were asked to give reasons for the course of events in the episodes and reflect on the goals attached to interaction, for example to win teacher's favor or to be popular in the peer group. Interviewer participated in the group discussion by asking questions, facilitating (for example asking follow up questions or clarifications) and coordinating (for example giving turns to speakers) the peer interaction in the group. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed into text files by a trained research assistant.

Analysis

The data were qualitatively content analysed (Mayring, 2000). The analysis strategy was compatible with the idea of a hermeneutic circle, which involves continuous interaction between the data and the development of a theoretical understanding of the key learning experiences (e.g. Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). First, all the text segments in which pupils referred to schoolwork were coded into the same hermeneutic category. Second, the text segments were coded into two exclusive basic categories: 1) *engaging* episodes, including interest, inspiration, energy, devotion, meaningfulness and positive emotions related to schoolwork; and 2) *disengaging* episodes, including single or repeated disappointments, prolonged problems, academic failures, negative emotions related to academic activities, becoming passive, and losing interest in school work. After this, the two basic categories were each divided into two sub-categories: *peer interaction* and *teacher-student interaction*. Finally, the sub-categories were divided into four exclusive sub-categories based on the action strategy used in the situation using grounded strategy (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005): *confirming strategy*, *navigating strategy*, *modifying strategy* and *withdrawing strategy*. A visualization of the analysis process is presented in Figure 1.

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

A confirming strategy refers to students' adopting the academic and social goals set by teachers or peers, for example student may adapt the peer group's norm of "not doing homework" even though it

might require giving up on student's own academic aspirations. A modifying strategy is characterised by students' efforts to influence the social environment to achieve their academic and social goals, for example student may aim to modify the classroom interaction and teacher's instructions. A navigating strategy refers to students' balancing the norms and values set by the school environment against the students' personal goals and aspirations, for example student may actively balance between spending time with peers after school and doing homework. A withdrawing strategy is characterised by avoidance or passiveness, for example student may avoid peer interaction during breaks.

Results

The students reported a variety of events and episodes, and described alienation and feelings of inadequacy as well as dedication and absorption. Students described both positive episodes causing satisfaction and engagement and negative episodes causing disappointment and disengagement from schoolwork. The engaging and disengaging episodes were situated in the social context of the school environment, including peer relations and relationships with teachers. Engaging episodes included active involvement in academic tasks and taking responsibility for schoolwork, for example, by doing homework and following the teacher's instructions. Appreciation and positive emotions towards schoolwork were characteristic of engaging episodes.

S1: He (*a pupil who is doing well in school*) is nice, doesn't bully anyone, and does his homework carefully S2: Yeah, he is calm and always listens to teacher. He is polite to the teacher. He answers to teacher's questions and raises his hand to talk, and does not disturb the lesson. (Engaging episode in student-teacher interaction, 8th graders)

In turn, disengaging episodes often involved a mismatch between the students' goals, needs and expectations in terms of schoolwork and the expectations and support provided by the environment. Students, for instance, described neglecting homework and rebellious behaviour. Characteristic of these episodes were negative attitudes towards school and the perception that schoolwork was pointless.

S1: If some of the classmates say that you always raise your hand in the lesson and answer teacher's questions, and so on, and it has started to irritate the student that all the others think that he is only like that. S2: Yeah, all the others call you a nerd or something. S3: So, then you can think that I won't raise my hand anymore. (Disengaging episode in peer interaction, 6th graders)

Students also reported using various strategies in the engaging and disengaging episodes. The strategies reported ranged from adapting to expected ways of behaviour and norms set by the teachers or peers (*confirming strategy*) to strategic balancing between expected behaviour and the student's own goals (*navigating strategy*) and from becoming passive and withdrawn from the situation (*withdrawing strategy*) to active efforts to modify the situation (*modifying strategy*).

Further investigation showed that students most often described confirming as their primary strategy both in teacher–student and in peer interaction. However, students described a less varied use of strategies in the context of teacher–student interaction than in peer interactions, i.e. withdrawing and navigating were reported only in terms of peer relationships. Withdrawing was typically related to becoming alienated from peer groups, because of experienced peer rejection, whereas navigation was more typical of students trying both to succeed academically and to gain acceptance by peers, i.e. being more strategic in terms of the diversity of expectations and norms set by the school. Moreover, the primary strategy used varied according to whether the episode was described to be engaging or disengaging (see Table 1).

[INSERT TABLE 1]

Teacher–student interaction

The students reported a total of 70 engaging and disengaging episodes embedded in teacher–student interaction. The majority of these episodes were perceived as engaging. Confirming was the primary strategy described by the students in teacher–student interaction. Characteristic of confirmation was students' attempts to optimally adapt mainly by implementing instructions and tasks given by the teacher. Students, for instance, described obedient and exact following of the teacher's instructions and doing the schoolwork for the teacher.

S1: Like he won't babble on his own S2: and he'll raise his hand and concentrate. S1: That's what we always do (chuckle). I: Yeah. S2: You listen to instructions and S3: won't interrupt S1: and you study for the exams, and that'll help too, like, you know. The teacher will know that you do study; at least you're like trying, at least you're making an effort. (6th graders)

The students often perceived doing what you are told and obeying the rules set by the teacher as the keys to academic success. However, they also identified over-adaption as a reason for becoming disengaged from schoolwork. Students, for instance, described alienation caused by the use of teaching methods that did not match the students' needs and abilities.

S: There can be problems with a teacher. Say, the teacher doesn't pay attention to how to teach in the lessons, for example. When our teacher writes exercises on the blackboard, a few pupils can't follow the teaching. In maths, for example, when I'm still making calculations and haven't yet finished, the teacher will write the answers on the blackboard. And I can copy the answers. I don't need to work them out for myself, because I'm so slow. It's not learning. (6th grader)

However, students rarely reported attempts to change the course of events. Adaptation or becoming passive was perceived as the most suitable strategy even in the situations that were experienced as disengaging.

Moreover, the results showed that students seldom report making efforts to alter teacher–student interaction. Moreover, the use of a modifying strategy in teacher–student interaction was mostly described in terms of disengagement from schoolwork. This included rebellious and disturbing behaviour towards the teacher and protesting against the teacher's instructions.

S: If there's a bad teacher and a good pupil, then the pupil gets nervous, when the teacher is so bad. The pupil begins to shout and rage at the teacher in the lessons and doesn't concentrate any more. Well, then teacher sends you out of the class. I: What follows from this? S: Nothing. In the following lessons, if you fawn on the teacher, you're forgiven. (8th grader)

Active, constructive contributions to learning activities were not reported. Students did not describe any situations in which they had attempted to influence classroom practices, for example, by suggesting alternative ways of studying or taking the initiative. Hence, they did not recognise strategies that would enable them to change the course of events in a positive way.

Peer interaction

Confirming was seen as the most typical strategy in peer interaction, especially in disengaging episodes with peers. However, students also reported the use of modifying, navigating and withdrawing strategies. Both modifying and navigating were described as being used in engaging episodes. However, navigating was not reported in disengaging events (see Table 1).

Confirming was most typically reported to be used in situations in which students faced a destructive friction between studying and expectations set by the peers. The friction was often resolved by adapting the norms of the peer group even though this might require giving up on academic aspirations. The acceptance of the peer group was perceived as highly significant by the students.

S1: That's the way it is. If your friends don't care, then neither do you. S2: Right. S1: If you, for example, ask "Have you done the homework?" and your mate answers "No", you think "I don't need to either". So, it's much easier not to care if somebody else doesn't either. (8th graders)

S: If you're bullied because you're a nerd, then you don't want to answer in the lessons. You want to get low marks so that you're not bullied any more. (8th grader)

However, students also described confirming to the expectations and norms of the peer group as a positive strategy in terms of engaging in academic activities. Relating to a peer group that valued studying and high achievement was perceived to be beneficial in terms of promoting academic engagement. Students, for instance, said that classmates' active involvement in academic tasks increased their own motivation to learn and invest in school.

S: If you're hanging out with friends who read and do the homework, well, then you force yourself. (8th grader)

S: If a girl or boy who invests in the school joins a group where nobody invests in the school, then the pupil, of course, stands out from the others. The pupil is thought of as a nerd; nobody wants to hang out with them. So, you have to look for a gang you can identify with. (8th grader)

Modification of peer relations typically entailed pro-social behaviour, including helping and giving support to others. Active membership of the peer group, contributing to a positive group atmosphere and promoting shared goals and interests, was also reported. Students, for example, described student that used modifying strategy as helpful and cooperative as well as empathic and respectful towards others.

S1: Well, those who do their homework carefully and things like that. S2: And, like, spend a lot of time with their mates S1: and won't leave anyone out. I: Yeah. H: Well, uhhh. S1: You're, like, honest and I: honest, yeah. S2: yeah and then you're, like, calm S3: and then you help people and like that. S2: They'll help, exactly. (6th graders)

Further investigations showed that students rarely described defying the expectations of their peer group. However, in a few cases, students described this strategy, which was used in order to cause anxiety, disagreement and trouble, resulting in decreased levels of engagement in the academic tasks.

Navigating was reported only as a way of combining conflicting norms of the peer group and personal need to do well in school. This, for instance, included students' attempts to be just like everybody else by hiding their academic efforts, through which they were receiving good grades, as a way to gain acceptance from the peers.

I: Well, how does this pupil behave then with other pupils? S2: Just like anyone else. S2: Normal. I: Yeah. So you don't have to stand out especially, necessarily. S2: It's better not to stand out. (8th graders)

Withdrawing was used in a total of eight engaging and disengaging episodes. Students, for example, described situations where putting extensive effort into studying resulted in alienation from the peer group. On the other hand, students also perceived withdrawing from lesson activities as a strategy to avoid negative feedback and bullying by classmates, for instance, caused by giving the wrong answer.

S1: They just do the exercises. S2: They're quiet. S1: Even during break they're quiet. S2: And do their homework. S3: They don't bully anybody. S2: They're a real nerd. S4: They're the pupil who wants to read. I: Well, what do they do in their free time? S2: They read and do homework. (8th graders)

Differences in perceived strategies among sixth and eighth graders

Confirming was described as the primary strategy in teacher–student interaction both by sixth and eighth graders. However, there were differences between sixth and eighth graders in the strategies used in peer interaction. Eighth graders reported using a confirming strategy more often than sixth graders, and navigation was more often applied by eighth graders. Withdrawing was perceived as a marginal strategy by both sixth and eighth graders (see Table 2).

[INSERT TABLE 2]

Discussion

Methodological reflections

In this study, extensive semi-structured group interview data was collected to capture the strategies students report using to engage in (or disengage from) schoolwork. The reflective and process-oriented research design gave the students an opportunity to reflect on various aspects of schoolwork, and the semi-structured interviews provided rich data. Hence, findings may have transferability for further studies on students' strategies of engagement in schoolwork. However, due to the distinctive features of the Finnish comprehensive school system (Sahlberg, 2011) and the limited sample size (n=161 students), generalising the results to other systems and other countries should be done with caution.

As a research strategy group interview is suitable when socially shared (and constructed) attitudes or attributions are explored. Discussing in the group helps adolescents who might be reserved with an unfamiliar adult in an interview situation. Moreover a group serves as a social support and other respondents' ideas spark new ideas, creating a snowball effect. On the other hand, interviewing in a group can provide disadvantages. A dominant respondent can negatively affect the outcome of the group and group dynamic may control the individuals' comments (Frey, 2004). In order to avoid this and to enable an authentic and safe interview environment for students, relations between students were taken into account when groups were formed. Moreover the interviewer had teacher training and was used to communicating with adolescents. However, a predisposition of adolescents to adapt their views to those of peers in a group interview situation should be recognised in interpreting the results. Further studies on strategies of engagement would benefit from direct observation in addition to students' self-reports on their behaviour.

Findings in the light of previous literature

Our results showed that students reported using various, more or less functional, strategies in the episodes that engaged or disengaged them from academic activities. The strategy preferred by the students was confirming. Especially in teacher–student interaction, students rarely reported the use of active strategies such as making suggestions, giving feedback or contributing to the development of

classroom practices. Some confirming enhances classroom interaction and supports students' engagement with academic goals (Pyhältö, Pietarinen, Soini & Westling, 2011), and teaching the ability to adjust one's action to others' and commit to shared rules is one of the social and educational goals of the school. However, when confirming is the only strategy for constructing academic engagement, this may result in a lack of student autonomy and further reduced levels of engagement. There is, for example, evidence that increased teacher control is related to a decrease in student academic motivation, negative self-image and behavioural problems during the middle school years (Roeser & Eccles, 1998). Instead student opportunity to participate in and contribute to classroom activities has been found to be positively related to their active involvement in academic activities (e.g. Reeve & Tseng, 2011; Westling, Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Soini, 2013). This implies that in order for teachers to support students' active, self-regulated learning, they need to encourage them to take a more active stance in terms of participating in and developing classroom activities – not just to adapt to them. In their study, Reeve and Tseng (2011) showed that some students apply agentic engagement, including offering input in lessons, communicating what they are thinking and needing, and recommending goals to be pursued. In our study, no such forms of engagement occurred. Moreover our results suggest that students' perceptions of their own role in schoolwork in terms of teacher-student interaction are static; students use one-sided strategy in interaction with teachers in both age groups.

However, students reported the use of more active strategies in terms of peer interaction. A reason for this may be that students perceived peer contexts to be more accessible and flexible for active involvement (Fredericks et al., 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The results, however, also indicated that attitudes and values of the peer group towards schoolwork often conflicted with academic goals. On the other hand, students also reported participation in peer groups that supported the attainment of academic goals. Hence, our findings confirm previous findings (You, 2011) suggesting that peers do have a significant role in the construction of students' academic engagement. An increase in confirming and navigating strategies in peer interaction in the older age group may imply students' increasing effort to avoid personal risk in terms of peer interaction. In fact, fitting in the peer group is so important in adolescence that especially in transitions it may risk the engagement in schoolwork if these two collide.

The increase of strategies in the older group may also reflect the fact that social strategies get more sophisticated and complex in the course of life. It is noteworthy that students' developing ability to adjust one's action to others seems to be a disregarded resource in academic engagement in terms of teacher-student interaction.

The findings suggest that meaningful involvement in a complex school environment, maintaining functional peer relations and engaging in schoolwork is highly challenging for students, and requires both strategic flexibility and self-regulative skills (see also McClelland & Morrison, 2003). The results suggest that schools' social environment does not always promote, but challenge, students' meaningful engagement in schoolwork. To understand the dynamic relationship between students and school environment there is a need for more information about how students experience, especially the ways they perceive the school's social environment and their opportunities not only to adapt but mould and shape the school context.

Pedagogical implications

Our results suggest that in order to enhance students' academic engagement, more coherent learning environments offering students opportunities to participate in both academic activities and peer interaction need to be developed. There is evidence that, at their best, reciprocal teacher-student relationships enhance students' appreciation of and positive emotions and attitudes towards schoolwork (Kalalahti, 2007). This, however, requires developing pedagogical practices that promote dialogical relationships between students and teachers as well as positive participation in peer interaction. In particular, the use of more activating pedagogic practices and a culture of trust in both in and outside classroom need to be facilitated to promote student participation (Van Houtte, 2006). Moreover, the peer group can provide a central resource for students' well-being and the development of social skills, and further supports the attainment of learning goals. Pedagogical practices could build more on students' existing positive social strategies such as navigating and skills related to these. For example giving more student responsibility in designing the school tasks could foster the ability to align one's own intentions and actions with those of others in a way that promotes positive learning environment for all (see also Westling, Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Soini, 2013). In order to change current school culture,

students and teachers should be encouraged to a more reciprocal interaction, which promotes also students' active participation. More precisely they should be able to identify and use a variation of social strategies, and especially emphasise the active and modifying strategies to engage in meaningful learning even in the lower grades. Moreover opportunities for positive peer interaction that also promotes students' resilience and confidence and, hence academic engagement should be intentionally designed especially in the transition phases of the school career (Pietarinen, Soini & Pyhältö, 2010; Jindal-Snape, Vettraino, Lowson & McDuff, 2011). Further, we argue that possibilities for students' active involvement in pedagogical practices should be considered already in teacher education and curriculum processes.

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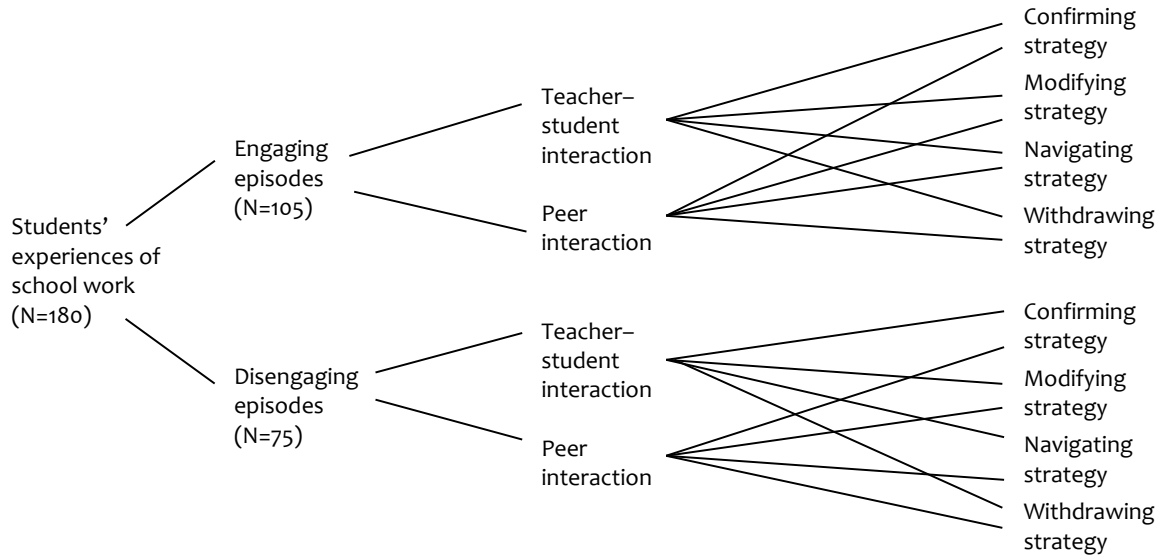
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Note: f = frequency

Figure 1. Process of data analysis.

Table 2

Share of strategies in different contexts

	Teacher-student interaction (n=70)			Peer interaction (n=110)				Total
	Confirming	Modifying	Total	Confirming	Modifying	Navigating	Withdrawing	
Engaging episodes	f52 96.3%	f2 3.7%	f54 100%	f8 15.7%	f20 39.2%	f19 37.3%	f4 7.8%	f51 100%
Disengaging episodes	f10 62.5%	f6 37.5%	f16 100%	f46 78.0%	f9 15.3%	f0 0%	f4 6.8%	f59 100%
Total	f62 88.6%	f8 11.4%	f70 100%	f54 49.1%	f29 26.4%	f19 17.3%	f8 7.3%	f110 100%

Note: f = frequency

Table 3

Share of strategies in different contexts

	Teacher-student interaction (n=70)			Peer interaction (n=110)				Total
	Confirming	Modifying	Total	Confirming	Modifying	Navigating	Withdrawing	
Engaging episodes	f52 96.3%	f2 3.7%	f54 100%	f8 15.7%	f20 39.2%	f19 37.3%	f4 7.8%	f51 100%
Disengaging episodes	f10 62.5%	f6 37.5%	f16 100%	f46 78.0%	f9 15.3%	f0 0%	f4 6.8%	f59 100%
Total	f62 88.6%	f8 11.4%	f70 100%	f54 49.1%	f29 26.4%	f19 17.3%	f8 7.3%	f110 100%

Note: f = frequency