# Students' engagement in school and peer relations: A literature review

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## Abstract

Students' engagement in school (SES) has been studied regarding its relationship with students' academic achievement and outcomes, as well as with school dropout and behaviour. Literature indicates a general agreement regarding the multidimensional nature of this construct, encompassing two to four dimensions - cognitive, affective, behavioural and personal agency (Fredricks et al., 2004; Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007), likely to predict several outcomes and be influenced by personal and contextual variables. As an element of students' socio-relational context, peer group assumes

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particular relevance concerning school matters, particularly during adolescence, despite the lack of research on this relation (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Lynch, Lerner, & Leventhal, 2013; You, 2011), compared to family. In order to describe the state of art of student's engagement in school and peer relations, we prepared a narrative review. It is assumed that a positive relationship with peers contributes to a sense of belonging to school, which, in turn, promotes the adoption of socially valued goals (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). This paper reviews the literature on the relation between students' engagement in school and peer relations.

**Keywords:** Students' engagement in school; peer relations; academic outcomes

## 1. Introduction

Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights the impact of proximal environments (microsystem) in people's development; therefore, students´ engagement in school will be a function of the interaction between the student and his contexts (peer group, classroom, family). The impact of peer group on students' attitudes and behaviours has been recognized, particularly during adolescence (Rubin, Bukowski, Parker, & Bowker, 2008). According to some authors (Lynch, Lerner, & Leventhal, 2013), most of the research done on the relationship between the variables peer group and academic behaviours understands and highlights immediate peer groups which relate to their academic outcomes. Once the group is created, its elements have the tendency to share the same characteristics, showing similarities with each other.

More recently, research has focused peer group in a broader perspective including school colleagues with whom the adolescents do not necessarily establish friendship relations (Haynie, 2001). Nevertheless, these colleagues contribute to the adolescents' feelings toward school, as well as to their academic performance (Lynch, Lerner, & Leventhal, 2013). Thus, the perceptions about peer interactions, in school context, influence students' engagement in school (Ripiski & Gregory, 2009).

Students' engagement in school, seen as the experience of centripetal connection of the student to the school, in specific dimensions – cognitive, affective, behavioural and personal agency (Veiga, 2012; 2013), has been operationalized as the extent to which students are committed to school and motivated to learn (Simon-Morton & Chen, 2009) and comes into sight related to peer relations in available literature.

In order to describe the state of art of student's engagement in school and peer relations, we prepared a narrative review. The method applied entailed systematic searching, reviewing, and writing to bring together key themes and findings of research in this field. We searched recent articles in scientific data bases such as SCIELO, LILACS, EBSCO Host (including: Academic Search Complete, Education Source, ERIC, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycBOOKS, and PsycTESTS), besides several Portals, for example Science Direct or the Scientific Open Access Repository of Portugal – RCAAP. Handbooks and PhD Thesis were also regarded. Research used controlled language and keywords were verified in a Thesaurus. Our study goals were considered in the articles´ selection process, and several criteria were applied (full document available; articles written in English). Reviewing the available literature was focused on identifying and analyzing cutting-edge core themes and their importance, as well as research lines, followed and suggested.

## 2. Peer relations: concept and assessment

Peer relations and the way they occur (well succeeded and ruled by support and identification or, in the other hand, characterized by exclusion and victimization) are fundamental in children and adolescents' psychosocial and educational development. Research on this matter suggests the complexity of the context created by peer relations and also of the results associated with them (Li et al., 2011), which are present in a large number of students' daily life (Juvonen, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2012). Several dimensions of peer relations have been studied under the scope of this broad term (Juvonen, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2012), such as the features of close friendships (ideals, individual characteristics, behaviours) or the peer group seen as a context where activities and values are shared (such as classroom colleagues). Peer support, the number of friends or the sense of identification are some of the aspects focused in researches (Demanet & Van Houtte, 2013; Shapka & Law, 2013); the quality of the relations (including support, companionship and low level of conflict - Berndt, 2002) or the type of support (academic, emotional, social - Juvonen, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2012) are also considered. Some authors have been studying peer culture in an even broader sense, referring to school colleagues with whom there is no proximity relation but who still contribute to school climate (Haynie 2001; Lynch, Lerner, &

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Laventhal, 2013). Research on these variables also attends to the polarity of the relations: positive, such as support (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Wentzel, 1998; You, 2011); or negative, such as association with problematic peers (Li, Lynch, Kalvin, Liu, & Lerner, 2011), bullying experiences (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010) or rejection (Buhs, 2005; Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006), having the potential to encourage or conversely representing obstacles to personal and academic success.

According to the motivational perspective, positive peer relations are promoters of school engagement as they fill up the necessities of belonging and attachment (Juvonen, 2007; Martin & Dowson, 2009; Ryan, 1993; Wentzel, 1999), consequently transporting positive feelings, essential for adaptive functioning, both global and in school context (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The perceptions of peer support appear related to academic performance, school adjustment (Buhs & Ladd, 2001), academic motivation (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Wentzel, McNamara-Barry, & Caldwell, 2004) and pro-social behaviours (Wentzel et. al, 2004). On the contrary, negative relations with peers come out associated with disengagement and anti-social behaviours (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Buhs, 2005; Ma, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2009; Wentzel, McNamara-Barry, & Caldwell, 2004).

In published research, the assessment of peer relations is carried out using student self-report scales, which are usually resultant from a process of item selection as opposed to the complete tool. Some scales measure general social support, including peer support; this domain shows potential for the development of more current measures. Some of the most used tools are the following:

*Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment* (IPPA – Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). This tool assesses colleagues' support and may also be used to measure parents support. It includes 25 items in each version and may be used with students aged 12 to 20. The items are divided into three subscales (trust, communication and alienation). Responses may be given in a five point likert-type scale (never-always). Examples of the items are: I like to get my friend's point of view on things I'm concerned about (Trust); I like to get my friend's point of view on things I'm concerned about (communication); My friends accept me as I am (alienation). It shows high internal consistency (.92).

*Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale* (CASSS; Malecki et al., 2000). This tool may be used with students from 4th to 12th grade. It comprises 60 items and measures perceived social support, in reference to five sources (parents, teachers, classmates, close friends and school peers), each including 12 items. Students must

classify each item in terms of frequency (1-never to 6-always) and importance (1-not important to 3-very important). The scale shows a high internal consistency index (.93).

*Peer Relation Scales* from the *Self-Description Questionnaire II-Short* (SDQ II-S; Marsh, 1992). These scales measure the quality of the relations with same-sex and opposite-sex peers. The sub-scale *same-sex peer relationships* includes five items, for instance: "I make friends easily with members of my own sex"; the sub-scale *opposite-sex peer relationships* comprises five items, for example "I have a lot of friends of the opposite sex".

*Perceptions of Peer Social Support Scale* (Ladd, Kochenderfer, & Coleman, 1996). It assesses the frequency with which students receive support from peers. Items are answered in a likert-type scale (1-almost never to 5- almost always).

*Peers subscale of the Child Behaviour Scale* (Ladd & Profilet, 1996). This scale is directed towards teachers and assesses children's behaviours in relation to their peers.

Sociometric measures (Buhs, 2005; Hanish et al., 2005 with preschool age children) and interviews (Estell & Perdue, 2013) may also be used.

Some specific studies on the relationship between the variables peer group and students engagement in school are presented in the following section.

## 3. Peer relations and students' engagement in school

Students´ engagement in school has been placed in the centre of academic success and school dropout discussions, as there are a significant number of studies sustaining this relationship with both personal (self-efficacy; self-concept) and contextual factors (peers, school, family); in addition, the lack of engagement seems to be related to low academic performance, behavioural problems and school dropout. This paper considers, specifically, the relations with peers and students´ engagement.

The quality of peers' relations is suggested as a school adjustment indicator in middle school and also in high-school (Wentzel, 2003). According to Wentzel (2003), relations with peers have been defined in three forms: (a) acceptance relations, (b) friendship relations (close friends), and proximity relations (among colleagues).

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*Acceptance relations.* Peer acceptance has been positively associated with motivational results, including satisfaction at school, achievement goals, the presence of socially appropriate behaviours (Wentzel, 1994; Wentzel & Asher, 1995), or perceived academic competency (Hymel, Bowker, & Woody, 1993). Peer rejection appears related to low interest in school (Wentzel & Asher, 1995) and school dropout (Hymel, Comfort, Schonert-Reichl, & McDougall, 1996; Parker & Asher, 1987). Wentzel (1991, 1998) points the importance of peer acceptance for the interest in classes, academic goals accomplishment and behavioural engagement. You (2011) used data from the *National Education Longitudinal Survey* (NELS, 1988) in order to study the relation between peers, group influence and engagement in school (in the 8th grade, and then in the 10th and 12th grades), concluding that peer value and academic aspirations have a significant effect on students' engagement, via locus of control and academic expectation; these regulatory processes are developed due to perceived peer support and affect behaviour throughout the years of schooling. Furrer and Skinner (2003) examined the influence of sense of belonging on students´ engagement and academic performance. Results showed that the tie established with the peers (as well as with parents and teachers) reported by the students was a significant predictor of engagement; the levels of engagement were mediators of the relation between sense of belonging and academic performance. Several authors (Bray, Adams, Getz, & McQueen, 2003;  Ryan, 2000; Shapka & Law, 2013) found a correspondence between the adolescents´ behaviour and the one exhibited by their peers, which is supported by the social norms related theories. Martin and Dowson (2009) state that this influence on students' engagement is indirect, by way of internalized motivational beliefs, that is, through the interactions with their peers, academic related beliefs, values, goals and expectations are interiorized, being consistent with those exhibited by their peers.

*Friendship Relationships* (close friends). Considering the group of friends, the number of friends is related to better grades in elementary and middle school (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997), to better accomplishment of school tasks (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995), to higher school adjustment and to a greater engagement in school related activities (Berndt & Keefe, 1995; Ladd, 1990; Wentzel & Caldwell, 1997). A higher quantity of friends was associated with less bullying behaviours and with a minor victimization (verbal, relational and physical), a result not found considering cyber bullying, in a study carried out by Wang, Iannotti and Nasel (2009).

Yu and Gamble (2010) also found that those adolescents who have stronger support figures in school are, accordingly, more engaged and show a smaller probability to engage in delinquent behaviours. Although friends, during adolescence, may impact motivation (Berndt & Keefe, 1996) it is suggested that this influence, when occurring, manifests itself in the setting of school goals and disruptive behaviours avoidance (Berndt et al., 1990).

Hinduja and Patchin (2013) studied a sample of 4,441 students from 6th to 12th grades and found that the students who indicated having friends with bullying behaviours ( face to face and virtual) showed a higher probability to exhibit the same type of aggressive behaviours. Berndt and Keef (1995) studied students from 7th and 8th grades and verified that they showed a higher engagement in school tasks, throughout the school year, when their close friends exhibited a higher engagement in school in the beginning of the academic year. A similar tendency was found in relation to disruptive behaviours. The relationships with academically engaged peers were associated with greater academic motivation, global adjustment and engagement in extra-curricular activities, in a study carried out by Juvoven, Espinoza and Knifsend (2012). These authors highlight the importance of having many friends on students´ engagement; however, the presence of a unique friend may also guaranty the emotional support necessary to school transitions, though academic support is the aspect most related to performance and participation.

*Proximity relations* (among colleagues). The group of school colleagues is different from the group of close friends because it has a public component and relies on a type of selection based on the characteristics most valued by its members, usually having a hierarchy (Wentzel, 2003). Research relates school climate (perceived relations with school colleagues in general) with academic and behavioural outcomes (Barboza et al., 2009; Ripiski & Gregory, 2009). Authors such a Ripiski and Gregory (2009) found that negative perceptions about the school climate (injustices, hostility and victimization) were associated with lower engagement in school.

Lynch, Lerner and Leventhal (2013) examined the relation between general peer culture (relational and perceived quality of task-centred behaviours) and students' outcomes (school grades and participation). The sample included 1,718 students attending 5th grade, and the engagement scale comprised 4 items that assessed the frequency of the occurrence of specific behaviours (e.g., How often do you carry your books to classes?), showing a 0.78 Alpha. The authors concluded that, in addition to

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the experiences with the group of close friends, the feelings concerning the quality of school relations and the attitudes toward school attendance were related to academic performance and school engagement. The behavioural aspect seemed to predict school grades; both types of culture were predictors of school engagement.

Several studies associate peer support and engagement in school. Berndt and Keefe (1995), as well as Wentzel (1998), found a link between peer support and behavioural engagement; Perdue, Manzeske and Estell (2009) found a relation between peers' social support and students' engagement.

Estelle and Perdue (2013) studied the associations between peer support (and also parents and teachers) on 5th grade children, and behavioural (work habits) and affective (school attachment) engagement in the 6th grade, all based on data from the *National Institute of Child Health*. Students were interviewed in order to obtain their perceptions about peer support, while engagement was assessed by teachers´ responses to a questionnaire. Results indicated that peer support is significantly and positively related with affective engagement. A longitudinal study carried out by You (2011) found an influence of peers during adolescence, through motivational elements such as locus of control and academic expectations; perceived support provides a sense of motivation and guides students toward academic success.

Some authors, however, did not find a positive association between peer support and academic results; Rueger et al. (2010) did not find a positive association between peer support and school grades, and a similar tendency was found considering attitudes toward school.

During adolescence, school colleagues may act as promoters or obstacles to academic attitudes related to academic success (Lynch, Lerner, & Leventhal, 2013; You, 2011), as shown in the following studies.

Negative relations with peers appear associated with educational difficulties (Juvonen, Graham, & Schister, 2003). According to some authors (Buhs & Ladd, 2001), disengagement may reflect a negative treatment by peers, such as victimization and exclusion. Several studies show that negative experiences with peers, such as rejection (Buhs, 2005; Ollendick, Weist, Borden, & Greene, 1992), absence of friends (Wentzel, McNamara-Barry, & Caldwell, 2004), aggressions and bullying (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbott, Hill, Catalano, & Hawkins, 2000; Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Ma, Phelps, Lerner, & Lerner, 2009) increase the probability of disaffection from school, as well as school dropout and juvenile delinquency (Battin-

Pearson et al., 2000). An association between connection with problematic friends and a decrease in engagement (along with family influence decrease) over time was found by Simmons-Morton and Chen (2009). Li et al. (2011) used data from the longitudinal *Study of Positive Youth Development* in order to study peers support and behavioural and emotional engagement in early adolescence. Results indicated that peers' support positively predicts both types of engagement, while bullying behaviours show a negative predictor effect. Both effects increased over time.

Bullying experiences (as bully or victim) seem related to negative academic performance (Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan, Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001). Several self-concept aspects may be affected by negative peer relations (Juvonen et al., 2000), for instance general self-esteem (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Keefe & Berndt, 1996). In a study carried out by Liem and Martin (2011), 1,436 students' perceptions about peer relations were examined; perceived relations with same-sex peers were positively associated, directly and indirectly, with general self-esteem and academic performance; perceived relations with opposite-sex peers were positively, directly and indirectly, associated with general self-esteem and indirectly with academic performance; the mediator effect of engagement was weaker concerning opposite-sex peers.

Eccles and Gootman (2002) state that the students' outcomes will be more positive as positive experiences with peers increase. Fredricks (2011) defines peers with positive academic orientation as those who represent a model of learning, share information, explain questions, work cooperatively, allow the development of feelings of belonging, internalize positive social norms and show behavioural, cognitive, emotional and agentic engagement.

## 4. Conclusions

The relationships with school peers, when positive, appear in literature associated with an increase in academic motivation (Furrer & Skinner, 2003), self-esteem (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Keefe & Berndt, 1996), and academic performance (Veiga, 2012). In opposition, disaffection from school may be a product of a negative treatment by peers, with impact on engagement over time (Li et al., 2011; Simmons-Morton & Chen, 2009).

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Peer acceptance is an important aspect of adolescents´ experiences (You, 2011). Environments characterized by care and support relations are facilitators of students´ engagement in school (Juvoven, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2012).

Finn (1989) emphasizes that social and scholar experiences, during the first years of schooling (such as retentions) may relate to school dropout in later years, by initiating a disengagement process. A study by Buhs, Ladd and Herald (2006) found that excluded and victimized students, in early school years, decrease their engagement throughout time. Thus, it seems fundamental the study of engagement from elementary years, adopting a developmental perspective (Perdue, Manzeske, & Estell, 2009).

Friendships with disengaged peers, the absence of friends and bullying and rejection experiences appear related to school dropout. Research suggests that, despite the importance of peers, teacher and parent support may be more significant for school engagement (Wentzel, 1998). A study with 822 Chinese students (Lam, Wong, Yang, & Liu, 2012) – part of the sample from an international research (Lam et al., 2009) which aimed to study personal and contextual factors influencing engagement in several countries – showed a strong relation between students´ engagement and teacher, parents and peer support, the first association being the strongest.

According to Wentzel (2012), learning occurs in social contexts, and social support encourages engagement in the classroom by influencing students´ emotional and psychological functioning. This author suggests that students will aspire to the goals valued by their peers and teachers when they perceive that school interactions are promoters of those goals accomplishment, by giving security, instruction, support and responsibility.

Finally, peer interactions are an essential concept to consider in further empirical studies, particularly regarding its assessment and also its relation with students engagement in school. The analysis of the interaction between these two variables may be regarded as a function of other school (teacher and parent support) and personal (gender, self-efficacy) variables.

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