

# **Student Engagement with School: Individual and School-level Influences**

LSAY Research Report 27

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report examines the engagement of young people with school. Engagement is an important outcome of schooling, and there are a number of ways in which it can be defined. In this report, engagement is defined through Finn's (1989) taxonomy of engagement or participatory behaviours, which examines students' level of participation in the extracurricular activities offered to them by their schools. Finn (1989) argued that with such participation comes identification with school, a 'belonging' that can help to promote a feeling of self-worth and assist students to become resilient learners, particularly if they are part of a group at risk of leaving school before completing Year 12. Participation in extracurricular activities has been described as providing all students with an educational safety net, and several US studies have found participation to be positively related to a range of positive educational outcomes. In a British study utilising a large national database of student and parent attitudes to school, Barber (1996) found that students' enthusiasm for extracurricular activities was seen by them as a particularly positive aspect of the school experience, and that parents strongly endorsed their value. An enduring effect of extracurricular participation has been shown to be the greater likelihood of participating in voluntary social activities as young adults (Lindsay, 1984).

The study is based on students who were in Year 10 in 1999 using data from the 1998 cohort of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY) project to investigate school-level differences in levels of engagement. It makes use of the full range of data for this particular cohort, analysing data from student, teacher and school-level questionnaires.

### **The relationships between engagement and student and school-level factors**

The first analytical part of the report examines the relationship between a students' sense of engagement and a variety of demographic, socioeconomic, educational and psychological factors, both at the individual level and at the school level. The major findings were:

- Females had higher engagement levels than males. This was apparent in all school sectors and at all achievement levels;
- Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds and those with professional parents had the highest levels of engagement with school;
- Students from independent schools had higher levels of engagement than those in Catholic schools, who in turn were more engaged than those in government schools;
- Students who plan on enrolling in tertiary study were more highly engaged than those who planned to leave school and go to work;
- Students at single-sex schools were more highly engaged than those at co-educational schools;
- Levels of engagement were found to be higher where students believed that their school had a good school climate, that is one where they have high quality teachers, effective discipline, high levels of student learning and a positive school spirit;
- Students who were generally happy with school and with learning (as measured by the positive affect scale) were more engaged than those who were not; and

- Students who were intrinsically motivated (e.g. I find school work interesting, I like to do my best) were found to be more engaged than those who were not so intrinsically motivated.

### **School and individual effects on engagement**

The second analytical part of the report examines whether there are significant between-schools differences in engagement and second, after finding that there are, which particular student and school characteristics lift engagement, taking into account differences in the academic and social mix of students across schools. This was carried out by fitting a series of multilevel models, with students at the first level and schools at the second level. Multilevel modelling (or multilevel regression) disaggregates the relationships between engagement and its predictors into a within-school and a between-school component, which allows us to examine the effects that schools have on engagement levels. For example, a student from a low socioeconomic background might be predicted to be less engaged than a student from a high socioeconomic background who attended the same school. However some other school might be so effective at promoting engagement that a low socioeconomic background student would have a higher predicted level of engagement than the high socioeconomic status student in the first school.

This report uses an aggregated measure of student engagement, referred to as *school-level engagement*, as a predictor in the multilevel modelling. While this variable was derived from the student-level engagement measure, at the school-level, it becomes a proxy, contextual measure of a school's normative environment. This variable represents, as best we are able to measure it with these data, a school 'ethos' of participation. It is an average for a school, and as such, there are deviations from the mean that would provide a starting point for further qualitative research studies.

The major findings from the multivariate, multilevel investigation of the role of schools and the influence of individual-level factors on student engagement are:

- Between-school differences account for almost 9 per cent of the variation in students' engagement levels. While this is not large, it is significant, and indicates that it *does* matter what school a child attends;
- The overall level of student engagement in the school was a strong predictor of student-level engagement. High engagement at the school level (which measures the effect of engagement over and above that at the personal level) was found to moderate the negative effects of socioeconomic status and indigenous status. This finding indicates that the school environment has an important influence on student engagement;
- Gender, parents' educational level, student perceptions of school climate, self-concept of ability and intrinsic motivation were all found to have an effect on individual engagement, over and above the influence of whole-school engagement. The effect of gender, in that females were much more highly engaged than males, was next strongest to the influence for whole-school engagement, while the other influences were much weaker; and
- Different predictors were found when the analysis was conducted separately for males and females. Apart from whole-school engagement, which was the strongest predictor for both males and females, the analysis found that parents' educational level and student perceptions of school and class climate were the strongest predictors for males. For females, the strongest predictors were found to be socioeconomic status, self-concept of ability, perceptions of school (but not class) climate, and attendance at a coeducational school.

These findings are important firstly from a policy perspective. Student engagement through participation in extracurricular activities is able to be influenced by school administrations through policies on the provision of extracurricular activities and explicit encouragement (or even an *expectation*) of student participation in such activities.

Secondly, the findings are important because they isolate several differences in factors affecting the engagement of males and females that can be influenced by schools. For males, attention in schools needs to be paid to classroom and school climate. Males appear to need more of a supportive school and classroom environment to be engaged with their school. They need to be strongly encouraged by their schools and by their parents to participate in extracurricular activities, and a broader range of activities developed by schools that are appealing to young males.

For females, schools need to focus on developing a strong self-concept of ability and positive views of school climate. Whilst for males, parents' educational level, and for females, socioeconomic status, are not malleable, their effects are small compared to the effects of overall high levels of school engagement.

This report finds that it *does* matter which school a student attends. Students at schools which have the resources or the commitment to provide a broad range of extracurricular activities and encourage students to participate, generally have higher levels of engagement than those in schools which do not. Strong participation in such activities leads to a student's closer connectedness to the school community, and it is argued in the report that there are 'flow-on' effects to more academic parts of the curriculum. As an equity issue, it is important that this be addressed. Socioeconomic status is a persistent influence on participation, both at the individual level and at the school level. At present, students with parents who have the financial resources to allow a wide participation in extracurricular activities obtain a benefit from schooling that those students with less access to financial resources do not.