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Academic Engagement in Students of Secondary and Bachelor Education: Towards a Complete Understanding of the Term

Abstract: The objectives of the paper are: 1. To offer a brief exposition of the origins and the definition of the concept of academic engagement. 2. To describe some of the manifestations of academic engagement in different school stages: from secondary education to bachelor education. 3. To suggest some direct implications of the term in the work of the educator.

Keywords: academic engagement, global academic performance, educational implications

1. The concept of academic engagement: origins and definition

One of the permanent paradigms within the educational field is investigating the factors that have an influence on school performance. Defining the elements that influence and promote academic success is at the same time an ambitious and relevant objective that may lead to the definition of theoretical contents that are difficult to apply in practice. "Engagement" is the factor that we propose to study. This concept

has appeared within a very specific practical context: the business field and more specifically the study of the so-called "burnout" (Salanova, Schaufeli, Llorens, Peiró and Grau, 2000).

The engagement concept is proposed as the opposite of "burnout" (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004), defined by Casuso (2011) as: "in general terms we can say that the daily connotations of engagement refer to the connection, implication, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, effort and energy in relation to what are you doing" (Casuso, 2011: 55). Operationally, the engagement would be framed within the motivational factors that factors divided into three dimensions related to each other: vigour (high degree of vitality and effort in undertaken tasks), dedication (enthusiasm, inspiration and elaboration of goals and challenges at work) and absorption (concentration and compliance of tasks) (Manzano, 2004; Salanova et al., 2000).

From this point of view, the engagement would be composed of: a behavioural element (vigour), an emotional component (reference to dedication) and a cognitive element (absorption). As Salanova and Llorens (2008) pointed out: "for these reasons, engagement is a clearly motivational concept as it has components of activation, energy, effort and persistence and is aimed to achieve objectives" (Salanova and Llorens, 2008, p. 2.3). It is in that sense that it has been proposed as an indicator of psychological well-being in workers (Salanova et al., 2000; Salanova, Martínez and Llorens, 2004).

To bring this concept from business to education field, the first research on student engagement was conducted. The students performed a psychological activity similar to a worker in the company: to carry out tasks to achieve objectives (Abouserie, 1994; Finn, 1989). From this point of view, the students were supposed to put into practice some theoretical knowledge and acquire a commitment with the objective to incorporate it into a constant performance (Lisbona, Morales and Palací, 2009). The commitment, in some way, "overpasses" the academic field, for example while they are doing academic activities outside school journey (Shernoff and Hoogstra, 2001).

The first definition of academic commitment, as Finn stated in 1989, exposed that engagement include two indicators: participation (including

response to the work request, initiative in class, participation in extracurricular activities and making decisions regarding the academic field) and identification (the sense of belonging and the appreciation of the school). Both indicators would be measured as “academic commitment”.

Later, Newmann et al. (1992) defined academic commitment as: “the psychological investment and the effort directed to student learning, understanding the knowledge, skills or work tools that are intended to be promoted” (Newmann et al., 1992: 12).

The current definitions are more operative. For instance, the ones proposed by Appleton, Christenson, Kim and Reschly (2006). These definitions include three indicators of academic commitment that explicitly emphasize the influence of contextual variables that are related with the school and also include parents or teachers:

- Behavioural Engagement: it would be observed when students take part in academic, social or extracurricular activities. The main idea is the participation, including academic, social and extracurricular tasks. At the behavioural level, the student's performance can be observed in three directions. The first variable referred to as “positive behaviour” would refer to the absence of disruptive behaviours such as school absences. The second one, would refer to learning and academic tasks that include behaviours such as effort, perseverance, concentration, attention or asking questions. Finally, the third variable includes participation in sport activities or collaboration in the school council.
- Cognitive Engagement: refers to personal investment, self-regulation and the self-control in complex situations. This takes into account the investment needed and the will to understand complex ideas. This also considers complex teaching skills.
- Emotional Engagement: refers to the affective component by the interaction among classmates, teachers or tasks demanded in school. It refers to positive and negative reactions to such interactions, as interest, boredom, happiness, sadness or anxiety. It is the basis for

creating links with an institution and directly influences in the academic performance.

In conclusion, engagement is a concept applicable to the school context with a multitude of characteristics that can be assumed by research with the aim of increasing the levels of involvement, passion and responsibility of students for their studies.

2. Manifestations of academic engagement in Secondary and Bachelor Education

2.1. Initial considerations

Throughout the evolutionary progress that the child experiences, there is also the development of academic commitment or engagement. In this way, there are connections between what is observed in general progress in children and adolescents and the level of engagement development. However, these connections are not transparent (Mahatmya et al., 2012).

The “evolutionary tasks” will be taken as a conceptual paradigm, defined as participation in specific academic tasks inside and outside the school. These are tasks that point to the main changes and challenges that occur during a certain stage of development, that is, what is expected to be carried out by a child of a certain age at a physical and social level (Mahatmya et al., 2012).

2.2. Academic Commitment in Secondary and High School Education

This is the period in which there are more studies on engagement, since both success or school dropout can occur (Finn, 1989). From the beginning to the end of adolescence, stable scores of engagement at behavioral, cognitive and emotional levels are observed.

Behavioral engagement

In adolescence, engagement at the behavioral level is manifested in the tasks, study behaviors, attention and participation in class discussions.

With regard to the family, it was found that those adolescents who complete the tasks with their parents and are helped by them have better grades (Mahatmya et al., 2012). The classmates in this stage play a fundamental role. Various studies confirm that those classmates who help others with daily tasks show a greater effort during the classes (Mahatmya et al., 2012). It seems that class attendance is related to teachers creating structured environments and involvement in extracurricular activities.

Cognitive engagement

It is defined as attention to the task and the teacher (Mahatmya et al., 2012). Students with high academic engagement tend to prefer changing tasks. In adolescence, tasks that imply a greater challenge, curiosity, interest and dominance with respect to primary school are generated (Mahatmya et al., 2012). Although the intrinsic motivation decreases, there are external conditions that cause it to increase, such as the promotion of critical thinking at home, or access to books or museums (Gottfried, Flemin and Gottfried, 1998, cited by Mahatmya et al., 2012).

The teachers' support perceived is a predictor of engagement during primary and secondary education, as well as some characteristics of the group of peers, such as the fact that they are oriented towards achievement and are intrinsically motivated. It should be noted that these last two elements explain the adolescent's academic engagement to a lesser extent than the feeling of belonging to the school (Goodenow and Grandi, 1993, cited by Mahatmya et al., 2012). The teacher's enthusiasm is also an element related to a strong score in intrinsic motivation (Patrick, Tisley and Kempler 2000, cited by Mahatmya et al., 2012) and as a consequence of a high degree of cognitive engagement.

Emotional engagement

With regard to emotional engagement, fear, anxiety, boredom or enthusiasm of the students are studied in relation to the school and the

tasks proposed there. In adolescence, emotional engagement is the type of commitment that decreases the most (Eccles et al., 1993, cited by Mahatmya et al., 2012). Fear of failure significantly predicts the decrease in grades, although it does not seem to be significantly related to academic engagement (Mahatmya et al., 2012).

Studies show that those students with greater degrees of connection to their school attend with greater assiduity, and report better grades (McNeely, Nonnemaker and Blum, 2002, cited by Mahatmya et al., 2012). It also seems that in smaller schools students are more identified with their values and need fewer disciplinary warnings.

Finally, emotional engagement seems to be influenced in adolescents by the feelings of challenge and importance that they attach to an activity (Shernoff and Hoogstra, 2001). In the same way, the support of parents for autonomy and emotional regulation when carrying out homework influence the emotional engagement of adolescents, for example in terms of motivation. Later research found that emotional engagement is a key element in the transition to adult life and the adoption of adult roles (Mahatmya et al., 2012).

3. What implications can the study of engagement have for educators?

The study about the academic commitment helps teachers to perform the following areas (Finn and Zimmer, 2012):

- To detect commitment behaviours on initial phases of the learning process, as well as these are essential to learn. Thereby, academic commitment and performance are repeatedly related on scientific research.
- To find the nature of commitment behaviours and how they can be seen at the same time on the first and last years of schooling. As a result, school dropout could be detected on early years of education and prevented in the future.

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- To confirm that the same academic commitment is an important educational result itself. For example, those students who display persistence in the resolution of a class problem are found to be able to complete post-secondary studies too.
 - To convince educational communities that they are important factors in the promotion of the academic commitment, which allows the chance to improve the achievement capacity of students that experience some difficulties along their academic life.

In summary, academic commitment is a concept with such theoretical depth that it is an endless source of research. That research should help design activities that will result in the well-rounded education of our students, considering that the students are committed when the teachers help them find answers to their real questions.

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