Part I Commentary: So What Is Student Engagement Anyway?

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Abstract

This chapter, by the esteemed motivation scholar Jacque Eccles and Ming-Te Wang, provides a commentary on the five chapters in Part I. The authors offered additional critique of the issues raised by authors in this part, as well as their perspectives on future directions for the engagement construct. In addition, Eccles and Wang described links between the theories of engagement and the Expectancy-Value Theoretical Model of Achievement-Related Behavior espoused by Eccles.

These chapters provide excellent overviews of the current thinking in the broad field of engagement. Doing the commentary has provided us with a great opportunity to think through our own take on student engagement as a concept. We have been working closely for the last year on a series of papers most directly related to the Frederick et al.'s (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004) perspective on school engagement. Both of us have been less involved with the work on engagement growing out of Finn's participation-identification theory and the work on dropout prevention and whole school reform. Reading all five of these chapters with an eye toward writing this commentary has helped me (Eccles) put this collaborative work into a much larger framework. We both thoroughly enjoyed reading each of these chapters and came away from reading them much better informed about engagement theory (ET) and its incredible importance for our thinking about school success and school reform. By and large, the authors of each of the chapters did an admirable job of summarizing the extant theory and research relevant to their chapter as well as critiquing the field and proposing important and promising future directions. Our goal was not to repeat their conclusions but to offer additional critiques and future directions as well as to expand the range of theoretical perspectives considered to be relevant to the general idea of school and classroom engagement.

We have divided our comments into several parts. In the first, we comment directly on each of the five chapters and end with a few summary comments on the full set of chapters. In the second part, we discuss our thinking on the general topic of these five chapters – what is student engagement? In the third part, I (Eccles) discuss my view on the link between general ET and my own work on school success. I focus

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more specifically on the links I see between general ET and the Eccles et al. (1983) expectancy-value theoretical model of achievement-related behavior (EEVT).

Comments on Specific Chapters

These five chapters provide a very broad review of the ways in which student engagement (SE) has been conceptualized, defined, and measured as well as a comprehensive review of the extant literature on the association of SE with school achievement. The chapters represented a breadth of perspectives and approaches to the study of SE that will open the eyes of all but the most well-versed reader. This is even truer of the entire volume, which includes perspectives from several fields outside of educational and developmental psychology. The diversity of fields represented makes it likely that most readers will be exposed to previously unknown work. In addition, the looser format of an edited volume allowed the authors to expand more freely in their writing than is normally allowed in the tight confines of a journal article. Because the intended audience of this volume includes both researchers and practitioners, many authors also discussed applied aspects of their work that rarely appear in published research articles. Thus, reading these chapters will provide readers with broader insights into the research than is possible in journal accounts of their scientific findings.

This part begins with an overview chapter by Reschly and Christenson (2012). In this chapter, they discuss the conceptual haziness that has emerged in this field as the definition of SE has broadened. They point out the need for greater clarity. They also point out the overlap between four basic theories of engagement and discuss the important relevance of ET for designing and evaluating school intervention efforts aimed at reducing school dropout. The chapter provides an excellent introduction to this part by laying the groundwork for the other four chapters. We reiterate several of Reschly and Christenson's critiques about the definition of SE in our discussion.

Finn and Zimmer (2012) provide an even more extensive review of the research most directly linked to Finn's perspective on ET. Although not entirely the case, much of the research they review has emerged either from Finn's early participation-identification theory or from work on dropout prevention and school misbehavior. Reading this chapter made it clear to us that two fairly parallel lines of research on school success have been going over the last 20–30 years: (1) the work grounded in ET and linked closely to dropout prevention and at-risk populations – a tradition that includes scholars like Finn, Newmann, Wehlage, Reschly, and Rumburger (see the chapters by Reschly and Christenson and by Finn and Zimmer for extensive reviews of this tradition) – and (2) the work grounded in psychological motivation theory that is more closely linked to academic motivation within the classroom learning context – a tradition that includes scholars associated with self-determination theory, achievement goal theory, achievement motivation theory, attribution theory, self-efficacy theory, and expectancy-value theory of achievement (e.g., scholars such as Anderman, Bandura, Blumenfeld, Connell, Deci, Dweck, Eccles, Elliott, Meece, Midgley, Pintrich, Roeser, Schunk, Skinner, and Wigfield; see Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006 for a full review of this tradition). Scholars in each of these traditions have tried to understand the psychological characteristics that underlie both academic success and failure. In each tradition, a wide variety of constructs has emerged and extensive research has documented the association of these various constructs with indicators of school success, ranging from basic learning to school completion. What is clear in reading Finn and Zimmer is how separate these two traditions have been from each other despite a quite common goal. As members of the second of these two traditions, we greatly appreciated the breadth of Finn and Zimmer's review of the work from the first tradition. We also appreciated the clear implication of this work for school interventions.

Skinner and Pitzer (2012) provide an excellent overview of an alternative theory of engagement

– one based in the second tradition alluded to in the previous paragraph – self-determination theory (SDT). This model stresses the importance of intrinsic motivation and the ways in which social contextual features facilitate the emergence of intrinsic motivation to engage in a task. In this sense, SDT focuses attention on the precursors of behavioral engagement and assumes that positive engagement is most likely when the context provides opportunities for individuals to fulfill their needs for competence, belonging, and autonomy. Skinner and Pitzer further hypothesize that teacher warmth, adequate structure, and support for autonomy are the three contextual features mostly likely to meet these needs and thus facilitate engagement. Although Skinner and Pitzer begin by stressing their view that "engagement is the outward manifestation of motivation," they then enlarge their definition of engagement to bring it more in line with the broader view of SE salient in all five of these chapters. They do this by including both a behavioral and an emotional component to their definition of engagement. By so doing, they increase the overlap between SDT and ET substantially. They add to the ET theorists' view of engagement a theoretical perspective on the immediate contextual precursors most likely to influence behavioral and cognitive engagement in the classroom. They also add a very thoughtful discussion of disengagement as a key construct and discuss the types of coping behaviors that will either facilitate or undermine learning and achievement. By bringing in these ideas, they focus attention on classroom-level engagement in learning activities, and they acknowledge that disengagement might be an appropriate coping response in some contexts.

Not surprisingly, we like this chapter very much because we are quite familiar and comfortable with Skinner and Pitzer's way of framing their approach to the issue of motivation, engagement, and learning. We particularly like their emphasis on engagement as the behavioral manifestation of motivation. We would add to this the idea that engagement is also the behavioral manifestation of social and personal identities (see Eccles, 2009, and later part in this commentary). By so doing, we are broadening Skinner and Pitzer's perspective to include something akin to Finn's notion of identification and to the kinds of identity-based self-system beliefs discussed by Bingham and Okagaki (2012) and to a more limited extent by Mahatmya, Lohman, Matjasko, and Farb (2012).

Mahatmya et al. (2012) provide a developmental perspective on student engagement. They link the ideas associated with notions of developmental tasks and developmental stages to age-related changes in the three types of engagement proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004): behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. This chapter is much more speculative than the other four chapters in this part because there has been less research and less theorizing about developmental changes in engagement. As noted by these authors, the most developmental work directly related to the idea of student engagement is the work done by Eccles, Midgley, and their colleagues under the notion of stage-environment fit (see Eccles et al., 1993). Hopefully, this chapter will stimulate such work in the future.

We do have one concern about the chapter that should be voiced as a cautionary note, given the early state of this line of scholarship. To their credit, the authors try to bring in thinking from the new neuroscience of brain growth and development. It is important that we take the cognitive neuroscience perspective seriously as we consider developmental changes in things like student engagement. But we are uncomfortable with the use of terms like "more cognitive engagement" rather than a different type of cognitive engagement to describe the nature of such changes. For example, they say, "during adolescence, individuals experience rapid physical maturation as well as rapid development of cognitive skills. ...Thus, the ability to become cognitively engaged with school is greater during adolescence compared to both early and middle childhood." Although the first statement may be correct (however, early brain development is pretty rapid and major neurological changes are also going on in the age 5–7 shift), the second is very controversial and may not be true. It is not even clear to us what evidence one would

look at to demonstrate that the "ability to become cognitively engaged is greater during adolescence." This depends on what is defined as cognitive engagement. To the extent that cognitive engagement includes the mental behaviors associated with learning, then it is not clear to us that learning to read and write evidences less cognitive engagement than learning algebra. These two learning tasks may require different types of cognitive engagement, and the brain maturation occurring during adolescence may allow for different and more conscious forms of cognitive engagement than were available during early and middle childhood. At this point, we need to be cautious when using terms like "more" rather than "different," particularly if we are talking about the extent to which individuals use their "full capacity" to be cognitively engaged at each point in development as our marker of individual differences in the extent of cognitive engagement.

Finally, Bingham and Okagaki (2012) provide a very comprehensive review of the literatures aimed at understanding ethnicity and student engagement. Essentially, this chapter focuses on the more distal precursors of student engagement. They draw on several theoretical frameworks and research traditions, including SDT, ET, critical race theory, various sociocultural theories, ecological theories, person-environment fit theories, collective identity theories, social psychological perspective of race, discrimination, and identity and social developmental theories of contextual influences. This makes for a very rich chapter, particularly because they have skillfully interweaved these various theoretical frameworks to help us understand very subtle nuances in ethnic differences in student engagement. Thus, this chapter, like Skinner and Pitzer (2012), focuses on the precursors of engagement, focusing in particular on the three categories of engagement set out by Fredricks et al. (2004). We wish they had been more specific when they reported the findings of various studies as to exactly which subtypes of engagement was actually measured and when engagement was measured as opposed to learning and achievement.

General Comments on This Part

As noted earlier, each of these five chapters provides the reader with solid overviews of the literature related to student engagement at school within the frame of the chapter. In each of these five chapters, the authors also point out a variety of future directions that could help us better understand student engagement. We agree with the authors that developing (1) a more integrative developmental-contextual approach to investigate the individual and contextual factors that predict student engagement, and (2) appropriate instruments to measure student engagement at different levels is critical. To develop appropriate theories, we agree with the authors that it is important to revisit current relevant theories, such as SDT, person-environment fit theory, flow theory, and expectancy-value theory, for more integrated insights into the nature of and influences on student engagement.

A related approach could be to synthesize or modify existing theories. The chapter by Skinner and Pitzer (2012) on the self-system model of motivational development is an excellent example of such an approach. Yet another approach for studying SE would be to build new models or theories that could be applied to classroom settings as well as to situations outside the classroom. Such models or theories could focus more on person-centered approaches. For example, they could focus on the ways in which behavior, emotion, and cognition develop as coordinated engagement-related processes in some individuals but as more disconnected aspects of engagement in others. These person-centered patterns cannot easily be studied using the kinds of linear or hierarchical conceptualizations presented in these five chapters. New approaches might also use patterns of engagement over time to explain and predict effective learning experiences within multiple contexts across time.

There is also a great need for better measures and methods of study, particularly after more comprehensive theories of SE and learning have emerged. We cannot know whether we are improving student engagement unless we can

measure it accurately and appropriately. Neither can we design good programs to improve SE until we better understand which aspects of student engagement influence which aspects of learning and performance for which students. In addressing complex questions such as how different types of SE are involved in learning, we need to think carefully about such measurement issues as (1) how we define the constructs that we are measuring or recording, (2) how we achieve internal and external validity, and (3) how we interpret our findings. Such measurement and interpretation issues will necessarily include *multiple perspectives*, *multiple methods*, and *multiple levels*. Student engagement processes are relational and dynamic; they involve ongoing interaction between individuals and contexts. The different components of engagement cannot be wholly captured by collecting data from individuals' self-reports. The use of multiple methods (e.g., survey and interviews) and multiple informants (e.g., teacher, student, and parent) to assess SE would offer a more comprehensive and diverse perspective. However, we also need to be cautious about relying on teacher or parent reports of internal processes linked to emotion and cognitive engagement, particularly if we then use these measures to predict outcomes that are also generated by the teacher (e.g., course grades).

Moreover, it is important to include and distinguish the different levels (e.g., classroom versus school building, as discussed by Skinner and Pitzer, 2012) and different time frames of student engagement (e.g., in-the-moment task engagement versus longer term engagement/commitment to a particular subject area, as discussed by Finn and Zimmer (2012) and by Reschly and Christenson (2012)). Many of the existing engagement measures are quite general, rarely focusing on specific tasks, situations, or subjects. Incorporating domain-specific measures will help to determine to what extent engagement represents a general tendency and to what extent it is content specific. Innovative methods such as the experience sampling method or daily diary methods, for example, could help us capture the moment-to-moment experiences of different subtypes of engagement and then over time how these moment-to-moment experiences of engagement congeal into more integrated "engagement" in a specific subject area or a more global attachment to an institutional setting like a school building. Such methods might also allow us to study the ways in which and for whom "engagement" in a school institution leads to greater moment-to-moment engagement in particular courses.

What Is Engagement?

There is no doubt that "engagement" is currently a very hot topic in the broad field of school achievement. But what is engagement? This is the topic of the five chapters in this part of this handbook. Each of the chapters deals with this issue in one way or another. However, after reading all five, we were still left unsure and unsatisfied. First, it is critical that we understand that the answer to this question is definitional. We can define student engagement in any way we would like, and how we define it will determine its usefulness for various communities. Defining it broadly will make it more useful for the policy making and educated lay thinker communities but less useful for the research and scholarly community. Defining it narrowly will have the opposite effect. Defining it broadly will increase the overlap of engagement with other theories and research literatures, making its unique contribution less clear. Defining it narrowly will force "engagement" scholars to make its unique contribution and value-added clear. The chapters by Reschly and Christenson (2012), Finn and Zimmer (2012), and Skinner and Pitzer (2012) all deal directly with this issue. However, at times, it seemed as though the terms student engagement, and school engagement, were being used rather loosely to mean everything that is good about an individual's relationship with his or her school. To the extent that this is true, then the hypothesis that engagement improves achievement seems rather circular because doing well in school both increases engagement and is used as evidence that engagement is high.

Policy makers and lay educational pundits love broad terms like engagement that appear to "explain" everything: "Students are not doing well because they are not engaged. So let's increase engagement and they will do better." But what exactly is engagement? What should be the specific focus of an intervention to increase engagement? If "engagement" encompasses everything from feeling like one belongs in the school to doing one's homework, or to participating in the school band, then almost anything we do to improve schools can be seen as an intervention to increase engagement. As scientists, we find this level of generality unsatisfying because it encompasses everything and anything that is related to students' and teachers' functioning in the school context. Probably the most concrete example of what we are talking about here is in the debate alluded to in several of the chapters about whether to include the concept of motivation as part of engagement. Those who prefer a broad, inclusive definition of engagement seem comfortable including motivational concepts such as affect, liking, feelings of belonging, and valuing within the definition of affective engagement. In contrast, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) prefer a more restricted definition of engagement, such as "the behavioral manifestation of motivation," that makes the concept of engagement distinct from the many other related concepts. We agree that a more precise definition will make "engagement" easier to measure and study as well as to be related to other theories of achievement and learning. At several points in their chapter, Finn and Zimmer (2012) also seem to prefer a more limited notion of engagement that focuses on behavior (both overt and covert mental behaviors), but then they also appear to be quite comfortable with a much broader definition. Reschly and Christenson (2012) also discuss this tension in their chapter.

It is important to note that the same problem exists in the field of achievement motivation. The tension between broad, inclusive versus more specific perspectives pervades this area of psychology as well. For example, Finn and Zimmer (2012) cite Newmann and colleagues' definition of motivation in their discussion of the possible overlap between the terms engagement and motivation: to quote, "Academic motivation … has been defined as 'a general desire or disposition to succeed in academic work and in the more specific tasks of school'." As experts in achievement motivation as it applies to motivation in school contexts, we find such a broad definition unsatisfying. On the one hand, such a broad definition is very useful in discussions with policy makers and practitioners because it orients them to the broad domain of motivation as contrasted with other broad domains such as achievement or problem behaviors. On the other hand, it is not particularly useful for discussions among researchers and for increasing our fundamental understanding of human behavior in school contexts.

There is a subfield of educational psychology that focuses specifically on academic motivation. The scholars in this field have spent the last 50 years building a taxonomy of various beliefs, attitudes, needs, and emotions that comprise academic motivation. They have demonstrated the following: (1) The various components of academic motivation influence different aspects of achievement in schools; (2) these components are influenced by different contextual features and experiential histories; (3) as a consequence of 1 and 2, different intervention strategies are needed for the various components, and these different interventions will influence different aspect of school-related behaviors; (4) the developmental patterns associated with these various components differ; and (5) the salience of these different components in motivating behavior differ across developmental time and social context (see Wigfield et al., 2006).

Given these specific facts regarding academic motivation and a very broad definition of engagement, it is impossible to address the question of whether motivation should be seen as part of engagement or vice versa. The answer is both yes and no depending on which part of each elephant one is touching – in other words, "It depends." For example, at the most general level, we can say motivation influences behavior which, in turn, influences subsequent outcomes or A → B→ C, with A=motivation, B=behavior, and

C = let us say learning. C of course could also be high school graduation, GPA, etc. Such a model seems quite satisfying because it is general and because it makes clear the mediating role of behavior. In this general case, one could say that B is engagement. If so, then motivation leads to engagement; motivation is thus a precursor of engagement rather than a part of engagement, and engagement mediates the relationship between motivation and school success. There are elements of this general model in each of the chapters, and ample evidence to support its validity is provided in each chapter.

But when affective engagement is considered to be a form of engagement, then the distinction between A, B, and C begins to blur. This problem is further exacerbated when one takes a developmental perspective, as is explicitly acknowledged by both Finn in his participation-identification model (1989) and Skinner and Pitzer (2012) in their conceptual model of engagement and disengagement in the classroom. In Finn's model, for example, participation in various aspects of school leads to success experiences which in turn lead to identification with school which then influences subsequent participation. Similar iterative processes are assumed in most models of achievement motivation and behavior and are at the core of such fundamental and classic developmentally focused psychological theories as conditioning, internalization, and social learning. The problem stems from the fact that these iterative processes make it very difficult to keep our definitions of A, B, and C distinct. Is identification part of engagement or the result of engagement or the precursor of future engagement?

This general 3-component model is even more problematic as we expand our definition of what fits into A, B, and C. As these general categories of constructs become more inclusive, the likelihood of making incorrect or at least not well-informed specific predictions increases. For example, if we select the desire to become a great singer as our indicator of A, the participation in extracurricular activities for B, and the learning of the content in specific courses for C, then it is quite unlikely that the study will confirm the prediction. We pick this extreme example to illustrate a more general point that is not so extreme: Confirmation of specific predictions depends on the specifics of the predictions. And it is in the specifics that clear definitions really matter. So, for example, policy makers have asked researchers to demonstrate that extracurricular activities affect academic achievement in large part because the research community has argued that student engagement is important for school success, and then we have included participation in extracurricular activities as part of our definition of school engagement. As is pointed out in several of these chapters, there is evidence that participation in extracurricular activities is weakly but significantly associated with GPA in some studies, for some programs, and for some populations. Thus, at a quite general level, these studies provide support for the general prediction that engagement in extracurricular activities influences achievement. But why does this association exist? Here the specifics matter, and they matter when one tries to develop an intervention designed, let us say, to increase the learning of the academic content being taught at school or students' performance on high-stakes tests. Why would we expect, for example, that increasing opportunities for participation in extracurricular activities would lead to better understanding of algebra or a foreign language, or science? We can certainly generate a logic model for why this might be so. For example, getting students to come to school and attend their classes might increase the likelihood of their learning algebra. But this will depend on the extent to which increased feelings of belonging at school actually influence the students' specific cognitive and behavioral engagement with algebra while they are in their algebra class. It will also depend on the extent to which the teachers are providing the type of high-quality algebra instruction that is necessary to help many formerly disengaged students master algebra. Thus, we need to be very careful when we make broad claims about the likely impact of various engagement-focused interventions on different indicators of school success. We need detailed logic models that lay out the likely connections between our interventions and the outcomes we hope to influence.

Otherwise, we are at risk of proving that some very well-designed interventions aimed at increasing school attendance have little impact on content mastery in specific courses. Additionally and perhaps even more importantly, is increasing options, for example, to participate in high-quality extracurricular activities, the most efficient or least expensive way to increase this type of academic performance? We are not saying that such programs are not useful for increasing other aspects of school success; the evidence reviewed indicates that some are and some are not. What we are saying is that we need to be careful and rigorous in our operationalization of concepts like engagement, as well as in our design of appropriate interventions for specific outcomes. In other words, uncovering the right engagement-related interventions requires us to look very closely at the specifics of terms A, B, and C in our general formula.

We are also not saying that the authors of these five chapters have not made similar points. They absolutely have in both these chapters and their other writings. What we are saying is that we need to be very mindful of the need for precision in our definitions and conceptualizations if we really want to change the various subcomponents of students' "engagement" in different aspects of their schooling experiences. If our goal is to reduce dropout rates, then increasing the salience and number of reasons students have to stay in school until graduation may be the most efficient strategy. If our goal is to increase science or math or English literacy and understanding, then we should probably focus on more specific targeted strategies within these classrooms. We worry that using a single phrase like "increasing engagement" for both of these types of intervention strategies decreases the likelihood that the most efficient strategies will be picked for these two very different types of "outcomes." It also increases the likelihood that people will want evaluators of extracurricular activities to assess standardized test scores as a reasonable indicator of the effectiveness of the extracurricular activities, even though there may be nothing going on in these activities that should influence test scores.

These examples illustrate another concern we have with defining what engagement is – a concern very well-articulated by Skinner and Pitzer (2012). This concern focuses on the need to be more specific about what level of engagement we are talking about. In Fig. 2.1, Skinner and Pitzer (2012) provide a very informative picture of the various levels at which the term engagement has been used as well as the types of outcomes likely to be associated with changes in engagement at each level. Keeping such distinctions salient in our discussions is critical to prevent misunderstandings regarding the effectiveness of interventions and overgeneralizations of our findings.

These dilemmas are exacerbated even more when we move beyond motivation as the "A" construct in the generalized 3-component model outlined above. When we let A stand for all precursors of engagement (B), then we have a very general model of human development that overlaps with many theories and is probably too general to be of great scientific significance. Although at the general level, it is bound to be true; at the specific level, it is not particularly useful for either theory testing or intervention design. It becomes a variation of the truism that good things lead to good things, which lead, in turn, to other good things, except when they do not. As noted by all of the authors, it is essential that we keep the distinction between precursors of engagement and indicators of engagement very clear. But, as also noted by the authors and by us in this commentary, achieving this task is often hard to do when one is operating at the psychological or personal level. It is easier when one is looking at social contextual precursors of either engagement or school success, as is evident in the chapters by Bingham and Okagaki (2012) and by Mahatmya et al. (2012). Bingham and Okagaki (2012), in particular, provide an excellent overview of the research linking the many contextual features of families, schools, neighborhoods, and peer groups that both co-occur with ethnic group membership and likely influence engagement, and thus may explain ethnic group differences in both engagement and school success. Mahatmya et al. (2012) discuss the ways in which various contextual features in combination with individual-level

developmental changes might influence age-related changes in various indicators of engagement. As is clear in each of these chapters, various family and school contextual features have been shown to be precursors of the psychological processes linked to both motivation and engagement (see other chapters in this volume as well). Similarly, most psychological theories of human development would agree that these psychological processes mediate the associations between distal contextual characteristics and school success. At the general level, this has to be true, except when it is not. The dilemma is finding out when it is true, when it is not, and why. The answers to these questions will come by being very specific about which A, B, and C constructs are being considered.

In closing this part, let us stress how much we sympathize with engagement theorists about each of these dilemmas because these same issues pervade the field of motivation as well. These are inherent problems in various models of motivated behavior as well. We bring it up here just to point out how difficult these definitional issues can be and why we need to be as clear as possible about what we mean by various terms at each point in our discussions. Both engagement and motivational theorists within both the educational psychology and the educational sociology traditions would like to have quite general theories of behavior and achievement in school contexts – theories that explain a broad range of behaviors and educational outcomes. Certainly, the motivational theorists associated with three motivational theoretical systems dominant today (self-determination theory, achievement goal theory, and the Eccles et al. expectancy-value theory) have this goal, as do the theorists associated with engagement theory described in these five chapters. To have such a general theory, one needs to have very broad definitions of one's core constructs. Similarly, to inspire policy makers and educational pundits, one needs sexy and overgeneralized core constructs. But to design effective interventions and move our theoretical understanding forward, we need to be much more specific.

We see the efforts to articulate the various subtypes of "engagement" as akin to the efforts in motivation to break the global construct down into its operative subcomponents. Such microtheorizing is critical in both fields. We also find it very interesting, but not surprising, that the overlap between these more global theoretical frameworks becomes clearer and more salient as this microtheorizing proceeds in both frameworks. The overlap is particularly salient when one adopts a developmental orientation for one's theorizing: From a general developmental perspective, these two general frameworks for understanding school success are very similar in both their explanatory mechanisms and their recommendations for general and specific school reforms. But even more importantly, this microtheorizing is making the unique contributions of these two frameworks clearer, as well as the ways in which the unique constructs within each of these frameworks articulate with each other over developmental time.

Links Between Engagement Theory and the Eccles et al. Expectancy-Value Theory of Achievement-Related Behaviors

Now let us turn to a more specific discussion of the link of engagement theory to one quite similar theory of school achievement: the Eccles et al. expectancy-value theoretical model (EEVT). We focus on this theory because it is not discussed to any great extent in any of the other chapters in this book. The other major theories of motivated behavior in academic settings are discussed extensively in Skinner and Pitzer (2012) and Finn and Zimmer (2012) and the set of chapters in Part II of this handbook.

There are two ways in which Eccles' theoretical frameworks connect to ET. First, the general EEVT model was designed to explain individual and group differences in individuals' decisions to engage in, and the extent of their actual engagement in, various achievement-related activities. Here the overlap is quite explicit. The second overlap relates to Eccles and Midgley's extension of the EEVT into their stage-environment fit theory of motivation. We discuss each of these in turn.

Eccles began her career interested in the question of why males and females engage in different types of achievement-related behaviors in various spheres of life including school, extracurricular activities, educational and occupational choices, and achievement-related avocational behaviors and contexts. Her initial studies focused on why females were less likely than males to aspire to careers in STEM, and as a result, to be less likely than males to enroll in advanced math and physical science courses in secondary school and college. To address this question, Eccles and her colleagues (see Eccles [Parsons] et al., 1983; Meece et al., 1982) developed a socio-cultural embedded expectancy value theoretical model of task choice/engagement – the Eccles et al. expectancy-value theoretical model (EEVT) – and applied it to students' course-taking decisions. Eccles and her colleagues have since used this model to guide their research into a much broader question: Why does anyone do anything? Although they typically used terms like behavioral choices, persistence, and achievement when describing their major dependent measures or outcomes, Eccles has always included the idea of engagement in her set of major dependent measures. When doing so, she was referring to both the behavioral and cognitive aspects of engagement as defined by Fredericks et al. and to behavioral engagement as defined by Skinner et al. rather than to sense of belonging to the institution in which the activities are placed. I (Eccles) would put emotional engagement as either an antecedent of behavioral/cognitive engagement (i.e., anticipated positive or negative emotional arousal resulting from engagement) or an emotional reaction to being engaged in doing the task.

My (Eccles) general perspective was heavily influenced by three broad theoretical perspectives: (1) The life course view that both personal agency and social structure are prime forces in life span development; (2) the social processes underlying socialization and internalization; and (3) the person-environment fit perspective that people fare best and are likely to be most engaged when they are in contexts that meet their psychological needs. I felt that bringing together these three perspectives would provide a comprehensive theoretical approach to task choice and behavioral engagement. The focus on personal agency led me to expectancy-value theoretical perspectives on task choice and task engagement. The focus on socialization and internalization led me to a focus on the ways in which external forces and context become a part of the individuals' expectations for success and subjective task values across a wide array of tasks. Finally, the person-environment fit perspective led me to theorize about those aspects of the context that would increase or decrease the expectations and values of the individuals' deciding to engage in various tasks or contexts. Thus, the person-environment fit perspective focused my and Carol Midgley's attention on the link between the nature of contexts and the needs of the persons; we assumed that motivation would be highest when the demands of the task fit well with both the person's sense of agency (in this case, their expectations of success) and the values, needs, and goals of the individual. In this way, the theoretical approach adopted by my colleagues and me is quite consistent with the approaches guiding both ET and SDT.

The EEVT general model that emerged is illustrated in Fig. 6.1. Our ultimate goal was to predict task choice and intensity of task engagement. The task could be as focused as doing a homework assignment or as broad as being engaged at school with sufficient intensity to lead to graduation. We argued that such engagements would be directly predicted by two major psychological constructs: expectations of success and perceived/subjective task value. Thus, the most proximal precursors of engagement where beliefs that are commonly thought to be part of modern achievement motivational theories. We then specified the more distal psychological and social processes likely to influence these proximal beliefs. Thus, like Skinner and Pitzer (2012), Finn and Zimmer (2012) and Bingham and Okagaki (2012), most of our theorizing has focused on the precursors of engagement rather than on the definition of engagement itself. We put both engagement and achievement in our outcome box. However, like both engagement and SDT theorists (e.g., Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Skinner &

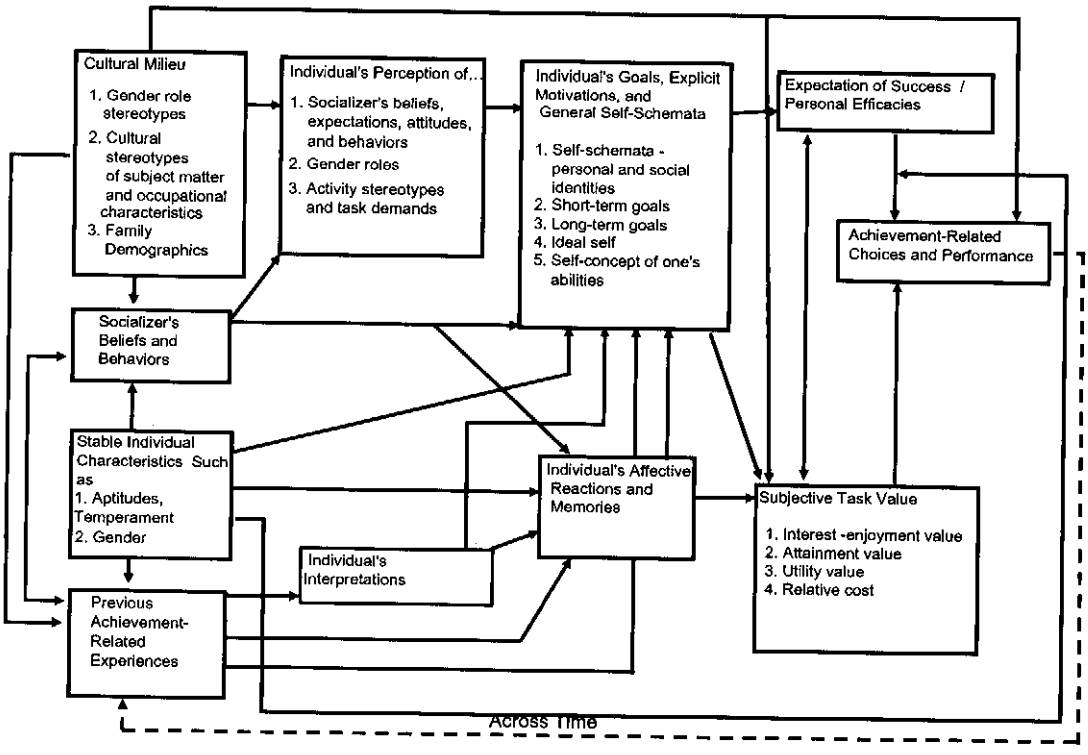

Fig. 6.1 Eccles et al. Expectancy-value model of achievement behaviors

Pitzer, 2012; Finn & Zimmer, 2012), we consider our larger perspective to be a general theory of motivated behavior that helps understand individual and group differences in school achievement. We differ more in the labels for specific constructs than in the overarching goal of the theoretical system.

Perhaps the aspect of EEVT that overlaps most with ET is the role of affect and of determinants of subjective task value. Because we are developmentalists, we see affect as both a precursor and a consequence of engagement rather than as a part of engagement. Like Finn in his participation-identification model (1989), we proposed that success (or failure) experiences in various settings create emotional reactions, which over time accumulate within the person to form stable positive (or negative) feelings about similar settings and activities, which, in turn both raise (or lower) the value one attaches to these settings and, to the extent that these association become part of the person's core self-beliefs or self-schema, increase identification with or attachment to the institutional settings in which such activities take place. We include such experiences in the box labeled affective memories and the link of these memories to the box labeled self-related beliefs. We further assume that these beliefs increase the subjective task value of engaging in tasks in such settings.

We also believe that subjective task value is composed of beliefs about how enjoyable the task will be, how useful the task is for fulfilling one's various short- and long-term goals, how well the task helps one manifest one's personal needs and both personal and social identities, and finally how much engaging in the task costs in terms of time, effort, energy, external assets, and the ability to engage in other tasks either more or less directly related to one's personal and social needs and goals. These same ideas are evident in all of the five chapters in this part. For example, they overlap with (1) what Skinner and Pitzer (2012) include under emotion and cognitive

orientation in Fig. 2.2; (2) what both Finn and Zimmer (2012) and Reschly and Christenson (2012) include under the rubrics of affective engagement, cognitive engagement, and school identification; and (3) what Martin 2012 (chapter in this volume) refers to as adaptive cognitions. However, EEVT places greater emphasis on the role of both personal and social identities and short- and long-term goals as key mediators of engagement through their influence on the individual's hierarchies of subjective task values. The central role of personal and social identities has become a major focus on my work over the last 10–15 years (see Eccles 2009), as I have extended the model to look at racial identities as well as more personal identities that underlie what we labeled attainment value. By focusing on these dimensions of the self, we have expanded the range of self-related characteristics that might influence engagement through their impact on perceived person-environment fit and thus subjective task value.

We also place greater emphasis than such motivational theoretical frameworks as SDT or AGT on the social or more distal precursors of engagement. In this way, we are more like Bingham and Okagaki (2012) in our orientation than we are like Skinner and Pitzer (2012), and Finn and Zimmer (2012). However, like Skinner and Pitzer (2012), Finn and Zimmer (2012), Mahatmya et al. (2012), and Reschly and Christenson (2012), we are very interested in interventions designed to increase engagement. This has lead us to focus, in the various extensions of the EEVT, on those characteristics of the school, family, and peer groups that influence school-related task engagement through increasing the perceived subjective task value of these tasks or activities. Like Mahatmya et al. (2012), we have been particularly interested in those aspects of the changing school context that may underlie the declines in many students' interest in engaging in school academic-related task as they move into and through primary and secondary school.

This concern with social precursors lead Eccles and Midgley to take a closer look at developmental changes in both expectations for success in and the subjective task value associated with the learning aspects of classroom experiences. Our own longitudinal data from the 1980s showed major declines in the students' expectations for and interest in various school subjects as they moved from elementary school into secondary school. Carol Midgley and I became intrigued by what might be going on to explain these differences. We decided that the decline reflected changes in the kinds of experiences the students were having in their classrooms. We predicted that students on average experienced what we called a developmentally inappropriate shift in the types of classroom and teacher characteristics as they moved into secondary school, leading to increasingly poor fit between the needs of many adolescents and the opportunities provided by their school. We called this perspective stage-environment fit or misfit (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Eccles et al., 1993).

Much like SDT, we argued that individuals thrive best in classrooms that meet their personal and social needs. Like SDT, we argued (1) that students have a strong need to feel competent if they are to maintain high expectations for success and (2) that students need to have positive relationships with their teachers for a variety of reasons. We felt that maintaining this sense of competence would become more difficult for many adolescents, particularly in large schools where their teachers are working with so many other students, because their academic deficits would make mastery of the material being taught more difficult. We felt that this problem would be further exacerbated by an increased focus on social comparative grading. Similar to SDT, we also argued that adolescents, in particular, have a growing need for greater autonomy and self-direction, while at the same a growing need to have close relationships with nonfamilial adults. We also argued that they need the chance to try new, challenging tasks, activities, and contexts in an environment that also provides a strong safety net. Finally, we argued that the emergence of more well-articulated personal and social identities would increase the need for opportunities to explore activities directly related to these identities – thus increasing the importance of the relevance of the material they were learning for the subjective task value they would attach to various courses and activities in the secondary school

setting. Directly related, the emergence of more well-articulated social identities would increase the salience of ethnic relevance and peer group norms. Thus, like Bingham and Okagaki (2012), we argued that ethnic compatibility and sensitivities would become increasingly important during the secondary school years. Many of these same points were discussed by Lohman et al. (2012). Thus, we see many overlaps between the work associated with Eccles and her colleagues and the work being done by theorists in the engagement theory tradition.

General Conclusions

In summary, there is substantial overlap across the various general theories of motivated behavior in the school context discussed in these five chapters, in the other chapters in this handbook, and in our commentary. At the most general level, this overlap suggests that we are converging on a shared theoretical framework across both the psychology and the sociology of education. Thus, it is not surprising that the measures used to assess engagement itself as well as its precursors and consequences are quite similar to the measures used to assess various key constructs in these other theories – a point well made by Reschly and Christenson (2012) and by Finn and Zimmer (2012). Finally, and also not surprisingly, much of the research presented in these chapters provides support for the basic tenets of each of the theories of motivated behavior discussed in this commentary and in the other chapters in this book.

At the more specific level, it is important that we compare and contrast the details of each of these theories in order to determine the most powerful and the most easily controlled influences on school engagement. It is also important that we find the places where these theories and approaches make different predictions and then test these varying hypotheses. Such research is critical to both the research and policy/practice communities. Thus, it is critical that we focus on both the similarities and the differences among these various theoretical approaches as we move forward on both the theoretical and applied fronts.

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