

## School Engagement of Inner-City Students During Middle Childhood

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Educators, psychologists, and sociologists are increasingly focused on enhancing children's engagement in school as a way to ameliorate problems of low achievement, student disruptions, and high dropout rates (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). One body of literature examines the relation between disengagement from school and dropping out (Finn & Rock, 1997; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). Another examines the role of classroom instruction and instructional tasks in promoting intellectual engagement (Newmann, 1992; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992). A third body of work has examined how wider school contexts interact with individual needs to promote or undermine

engagement (Connell, 1990; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Skinner & Belmont, 1993). Each body of literature presumes that engaged students are more likely to prosper as they move through school and that schools are organizations that reward engagement by providing incentives and niches that promote further engagement.

We believe school engagement matters more now than it has in the past. Children share in the widespread decline in trust in organizations and less-ready acceptance of authority. Students no longer can be counted on to automatically respect and comply with behavioral and academic expectations imposed by teachers and school administrators (Janowitz, 1978; Modell & Elder, 2002). The popular press describes students as alienated from schooling, even when they recognize its instrumental value to them; interviews suggest that suburban students view education as merely a grade game, and try to get by doing as little as possible (Burkett, 2001; Pope, 2002). Academic studies find steep declines in motivation and increasing boredom across the grade levels (Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984; Fredricks & Eccles, 2002); this decline starts in elementary school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997; Finn, 1989). Some argue that the disconnect from school is more intense for minority students, who fail to see the connection of what is taught to their lives (Graham, 1994; Mickelson, 1990), and for whom even the instrumental value of schools—the long-term payoff—may seem improbable (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986).

Our concern for student engagement ties to the world of work where the new global, fast changing, technological and information driven economies require knowledgeable managers and workers who can synthesize and evaluate new information, think critically, and solve problems. Schools are supposed to prepare students to live and work in that world. We worry that today's disengaged students will not attain critical skills and dispositions and become tomorrow's disengaged workers. Our assumption is that engaged students, with a commitment to education, will acquire the broad capabilities that, it is said, the current marketplace demands.

In this chapter we address several questions about engagement of urban minority students during the middle childhood years. We chose to study urban minority youngsters because they are most often identified as being at risk for disengagement, and for a resultant troubled pathway through school that too often results in failure to achieve, failure to graduate, or both. Further, we focus on the period of middle childhood because it is often a critical point in students' educational pathways, a junction where factors internal and external to students come together to influence youngsters' long-term commitment to the educational process. We pose a series of unfolding questions seeking to bring into focus a more fully realized sense of what school engagement is and how it happens at school. We ask the following:

- What patterns of engagement do we find?
- How does the classroom context influence engagement?
- What characterizes low engagement during middle childhood?

Our answers rest on questionnaires and interviews gained from third, fourth, and fifth graders in inner-city schools. We also obtained teacher reports about students, gathered student grades and achievement test scores, and interviewed teachers and administrators about their practices.

## **PRIOR RESEARCH ON ENGAGEMENT**

The different foci of the engagement literature explain the shifting conceptualization of children's school engagement. Where academic learning is the focus outcome, cognitive engagement is brought to the fore conceptually. Cognitive engagement draws on the idea of investment; it includes being thoughtful and being willing to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills. Where the subject of school dropout has drawn attention to engagement, behavioral engagement centers the discussion. Behavioral engagement draws on the idea of participation; it includes involvement in academic and social activities in the classroom and extracurricular activities including conduct and effort. Behavioral engagement is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out. Behavioral engagement is also central to studies of early school failure. Where classroom climate and relationships are central concerns, emotional engagement becomes most prominent. Emotional engagement draws on the idea of appeal; it includes positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, or school. Emotional engagement also is defined as having feelings of belonging and of valuing learning and the broader goals of schooling.

In many ways, the definitions of three types of engagement overlap with definitions of concepts studied previously. For example, the literatures on student conduct and on-task behavior (Karweit, 1989; Peterson, Swing, Stark, & Wass, 1984), student attitudes (Epstein & McPartland, 1976; Yamamoto, Thomas, & Karns, 1969), interest and values (Eccles et al., 1983), and student self-regulated learning (Corno & Mandinach, 1983; Zimmerman, 1990) are similar to behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement. Consequently, examining each of the three types of engagement separately is likely to contribute only minimally to existing knowledge about students' behavioral and psychological connections with school and learning.

Instead, our work has capitalized on engagement as a multidimensional construct that encompasses each of the three components. This conceptualization of engagement as an interplay of behavior, emotion, and cognition

can provide a richer characterization of children at school than any of the research on single components can offer. In reality, the three components are dynamically embedded within a single individual, and are not isolated processes.

Until recently (see Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000), prior work on constructs related to engagement (such as attitudes or interest) highlighted individual differences, rather than the child in context, as the primary focus of study. However, the idea of engagement assumes malleability, which results from an interaction between individual and context and which, therefore, is responsive to variation in environments. Routes to student engagement may be social or academic and they may stem from opportunities in the context for interpersonal relationships or for participation in social or intellectual endeavors. Teacher and peer relations, academic tasks, and classroom work norms have been found to influence different components of engagement (Kindermann, 1993; Marks, 2000; Skinner & Belmont, 1993; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). However, for the most part, each factor has been related to one type of engagement. A multifaceted approach requires exploring how these environmental factors simultaneously impact all three components of engagement and influence desired outcomes. Studying engagement as multidimensional and as an interaction between the person and the environment promises to help us better understand the complexity of children's experiences in school and result in the design of specifically targeted and nuanced interventions.

## THE STUDY

Our work was designed to address unanswered questions and methodological limitations in the current research on engagement.

- First, we target urban minority students in middle childhood, because this a population considered to be at risk for school failure and this is the period where initial declines in school motivation have been found to occur.

- Second, our measures and analyses distinguish among the three types of engagement, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, within the same individuals.

- Third, unlike studies that employ solely variable-oriented techniques, we use both variable- and person-centered analyses to examine engagement. The latter approach allows us to explore configurations of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement and their prevalence.

- Fourth, we focus on how engagement is influenced by children's perceptions of both social and academic aspects of classrooms; most studies that are attentive to context focus on one or the other. In addition, we look at how

these factors are related to all three areas of engagement simultaneously to explore which contextual factors or combinations of factors have the most influence on each component of engagement.

- Finally, to explore engagement and perceptions of context, we use a combination of survey and interview data. Using both, we gain insights into whether high- and low-engaged students focus on different aspects of their experiences or whether they focus on the same ones, but react differently. The interviews also help us to explore variability within levels of engagement—whether there are different types of low-engaged students or whether they are more similar than different. Such information should provide important insights into whether unidimensional interventions—that is, interventions that focus only on cognitive, or only on emotional, or only on behavioral, aspects of engagement—are likely to be effective for most low-engaged students.

### Participants

**Schools.** We chose neighborhood schools from Chicago, Illinois, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Detroit, Michigan, rather than selecting specialized magnet or atypical schools with special foci, selection criteria, funding, and resources. The schools we worked with over 2 years enrolled proportionally more Latino or African American students than did the district or the state. For instance, over 95% of the students in two of the schools were of these ethnic backgrounds whereas the averages for district and state were 87% and 35%, respectively. Also, 95% of students in each school qualified for reduced or free lunch programs.

We purposefully selected schools that, in their contexts, are considered “well-functioning” by administrators and researchers working in the districts. We chose well-functioning schools to increase the likelihood of finding examples (in the form of policies, school-level initiatives, curriculum, or classroom practices) of things that other schools in similar contexts might emulate to increase the engagement of their students. Well-functioning means well run, safe, and orderly, with a relatively stable administration, a tolerable amount of student disciplinary problems, and a positive school climate. Well-functioning also means that the schools can focus on increasing student achievement. The schools had succeeded to a modest degree in reaching their achievement goals—student scores were improving and near average for the district. Nevertheless, a vast majority of students in the districts did not meet competency standards on statewide tests.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>In the two Chicago schools, 38% and 21% of the school's third graders “met” or “exceeded” the state's testing goals in reading; 33% of their common district's third graders “met” or “exceeded” state goals in reading; the comparable state-level statistic was 62%. In mathematics, 52% of one school and just 22% of the other's third graders “met” or “exceeded” state goals in mathe-

**Students.** A total of 660 students drawn from 56 classrooms in Grades 3 through 5 in four schools participated in our study in Year 1. For Year 2 of this study, which we report on in this chapter, we surveyed 294 students from three of the Year 1 schools in 22 Grade 4 and Grade 5 classrooms, which included 145 students from Year 1 still enrolled in participating schools. Our analyses for this chapter are restricted to Year 2 data because the findings were similar at Year 1. Also, some of our measures were revised following analyses of the first-year data and thus were somewhat stronger at Year 2. Further, changes in engagement over the 2 years of the study have been reported elsewhere (see Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, 2002).

### The Measures

We studied engagement through a combination of student surveys and individual interviews. We also gathered teacher ratings of student engagement and achievement, student grades, and achievement test scores. The student measures showed good reliability, with internal consistency coefficients ranging from .72 to .86. Further information on the measures can be found in Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, and Paris (in press).

**Student Surveys.** The 30-min surveys were read aloud to students in each class by either their teacher or a member of the research team. Surveys were administered in Spanish to (a) students in the bilingual classrooms, (b) those who requested a Spanish version, and (c) Spanish-speaking students who, according to teacher judgment, would better understand the Spanish version. The survey measures included 5-point Likert-type scale items about aspects of student engagement and classroom context. The survey items were drawn from a variety of measures of motivation and classroom climate and context (Eccles, Blumenfeld, & Wigfield, 1984; Midgley et al., 1995; Wellborn & Connell, 1987), as well as new items developed for this study.

Cognitive engagement items, dealing with investment in learning, going beyond requirements, and use of learning strategies, were drawn from a variety of previously developed measures (Finn, Pannozzo, & Voelkl, 1995;

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matics; the comparable statistics for the district and state were 38% and 69%, respectively. Overall performance for these two schools' fifth graders, relative to their district and state peers, dropped somewhat. Proportionately fewer students "met" or "exceeded" state goals in both reading and mathematics than for the district. In Milwaukee, 47% of the fourth graders scored at "proficient" or "advanced" on the state reading assessment, and 63% of its fourth graders scored "proficient" or "advanced" in mathematics. For the district, 52% and 47% of the fourth graders scored at these levels in reading and mathematics, respectively. For the state, the comparable statistics were 78% and 74%.

Pintrich, Smith, Garcia, & McKeachie, 1993; Wellborn & Connell, 1987) and new items developed for this study. Sample items included the following: "When I read a book, I ask myself questions to make sure I understand what it is about" and "I study at home even when I don't have a test." Behavioral engagement items dealt with conduct, attention, following rules, and completing work. Affective engagement questions dealt with children's feelings, interests, and the value they accorded to their schooling. Sample behavioral and affective items are as follows: "I complete my homework on time," "I get in trouble at school," "I feel happy in school," and "I am interested in the work at school."

The surveys also tapped children's perceptions of classroom and school contexts. Students were asked about social (teacher and peer relations) and academic aspects (tasks and work norms) of their classroom. Items about the students' teachers covered personality, academic and personal supportiveness, and fairness. Items about peers focused on peer interactions (caring, support, teasing) and personal friendships. Questions about academic context covered task characteristics (challenge, difficulty, variety) and work norms, including time devoted to work, expectations for getting work done, and misbehavior that interfered with learning.

**Interviews.** We interviewed a subset of 92 surveyed children to get more depth about their school experiences. In Year 2, we carried out 46 interviews, many of them with children who had been interviewed the year before. The interviews were conducted individually, audiotaped, and took approximately 30 to 45 min. A bilingual interviewer worked with limited English proficient students.

The interviews included questions about engagement and about the social and academic aspects of the classroom assessed in the student surveys. To study reasons for change in engagement, the second year's interviews asked students to comment on differences in their current and previous year's engagement and classroom environment. The interviews were semistructured, consisting of a series of questions and probes that moved from general to specific in each area of interest: the school, the teacher, peers, class work, family, and engagement. The questions and probes were designed to explore a topic further if the student had not mentioned it previously or to clarify student responses. To avoid repetition and maintain student interest, the interviewers were instructed to skip questions about things that the student had discussed already or, if the responses were brief, to remind students of their answers and to ask if they had more to say. As an example, a child was asked, "What is your teacher like?" and was further prompted to describe whether the teacher was fair, caring, interesting, and helpful.

## FINDINGS

Later we discuss results concerning children's engagement, including levels and patterns shown in variable- and person-centered analyses. We then describe student perceptions of context, report on relations between context perceptions and engagement, and highlight differences in how high- and low-engaged students view their classroom contexts. The unique contributions of individual and classroom context to variation in engagement and in perceptions of the classroom are considered based on Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) analyses (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). Finally, we use cases to illustrate three different types of low-engaged students.

Because we draw on two sources of data, it is important to note that there was good correspondence between how the students responded in the surveys and what they said in the interviews. Five months elapsed between the surveys and the interviews. And yet, we found that numerical ratings of engagement based on interview statements were significantly associated with self-reports on survey scales of engagement. Similarly, ratings based on degree of positive or negative valence of statements about dimensions of classroom context during the interviews were significantly correlated with student ratings of the same dimensions in the surveys.

### Engagement

**Levels, Age, and Gender Differences.** Overall, engagement was fairly high. The mean for behavioral engagement was 4.0 (of a possible 5.0), with a standard deviation of 0.76. The mean for emotional engagement was 3.76 (standard deviation = 0.85). Finally, the mean for cognitive engagement was 3.49 (standard deviation = 0.79).

The three types of engagement were significantly correlated ( $r = .52$  to  $.60$ ). As a group, students who were more behaviorally engaged were likely to be more emotionally and cognitively engaged. Although these correlations are significant, they are modest, indicating that the three dimensions of engagement are tapping different aspects of students' experiences in school. We hypothesize that the unexplained variance is due to some combination of measurement error and the theoretical differentiation among engagement's three dimensions. We can support this hypothesis by noting that the correlations between dimensions were lower than the inter-item correlations within each dimension. Also, as children matured between Years 1 and 2, the inter-item correlation within each dimension increased more prominently than did correlation across dimensions. Perhaps children were drawing sharper distinctions among the dimensions; alternatively, they may have become more accurate in expressing their experience with the mechanisms that our survey afforded them.



**Patterns of Engagement.** We explored differentiation among the three types of engagement by adopting a typological, within-case analytic mode, rather than adopting the more typical approach of either treating the types of engagement as distinct or simply summing across the correlated dimensions of engagement to create a single variable. One strength of a multidimensional view of engagement is that it allows for rich characterizations of individuals in terms of behavior, emotion, and cognition. Person-oriented analyses use the pattern of variables as the main unit of analysis. Unlike standard linear strategies such as regression analyses that assess the average effects of a variable on the average individual in the sample, this approach allowed us to explore configurations of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement and their prevalence and therefore to match our analytic strategy to our theoretical model of engagement as a multidimensional construct. In other words, this approach allowed us to explore individual differences in the configurations rather than group averages.

We analyzed the three engagement scores using the SLEIPNER program (Bergman & El-Khoury, 1995). This statistical package was developed specifically for person-oriented analyses and includes several algorithms used in this study. Student ratings were cluster analyzed using Ward's method. This procedure maximizes differences between clusters and is one of the most robust cluster methods under a variety of conditions (Milligan, 1996). We found that the six-cluster solution provided the best fit to the data, with an explained error sum of squares equal to 67.3. This number can roughly be interpreted as the percentage of variance explained. These profiles (see Fig. 7.1) provide a picture of engagement in late middle childhood that results from a combination of personal traits, prior experiences, and the affordances that are made available to students in these "well-functioning," inner-city public schools.

Comparisons of the three engagement ratings across the six clusters yielded several statistically significant differences, not surprising given the nature of the clustering procedure. More importantly however, the clusters were significantly different on other indicators of students' academic experience, including perceptions of the classroom environment gathered from surveys and interviews (see context discussion later). The results of these comparisons suggest that the clusters represented valid configurations of engagement.

Although the cluster analysis, of course, reflects the considerable correlation among the three dimensions of children's school engagement, several of the patterns showed a great deal of variability. The Highly Engaged and Disengaged clusters differ strikingly. Similarly, the Moderately Engaged group is a slightly less emphatic variant of the Highly Engaged cluster. But, just as straightforwardly, the Disengaged cluster represents a group of children who, despite a lack of affective or cognitive engagement, remain rela-

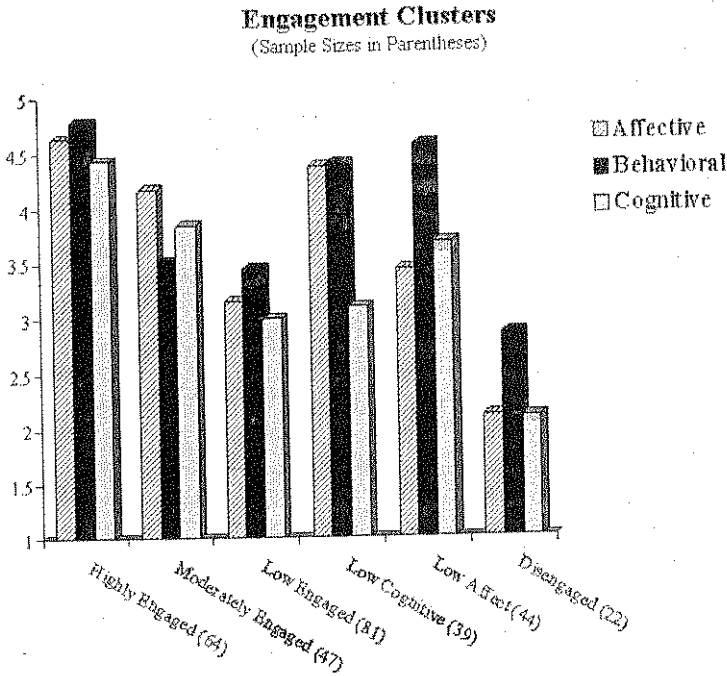


FIG. 7.1. Six engagement clusters.

tively compliant, at least as indicated by reports of behavioral engagement. The Low Cognitive cluster represents students who are behaviorally and affectively engaged, even as the school provides little cognitive charm for these children. The Low Affect cluster, roughly as prevalent as the Low Cognitive group, consists of children who appear to sustain their reasonably compliant behavioral engagement not because they feel affectively engaged at school, but because the academic work there, to a modest degree at least, grips them. Given these differing patterns, which of these students should concern us?

### Characteristics of Least-Engaged Students

Approximately a third of the students appear in the Low Engaged and Disengaged clusters. Who are these students? As others have shown, least-engaged students are significantly more likely to be boys, whereas girls are highly overrepresented in the clusters of most-engaged students (Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994; Finn & Rock, 1997; Marks, 2000). Least-engaged students are more likely to be older. This finding may simply reflect that younger students tend to be more positive about school than older students (and

hence, they tend to use higher ratings on these kinds of scales) or that younger students have not drawn clear distinctions among various dimensions of schools (and hence, do not differentiate their responses on these kinds of scales). Our results mirror findings in the literature of a downward shift in some types of motivation, such as competency perceptions, expectancies, and interest at Grade 4 when the curriculum becomes more difficult, expectations increase, and students are more developmentally capable of judging their ability in comparison to others<sup>2</sup> (Ruble, 1983; Stipek & Daniels, 1988).

Low-engaged students are not more likely to be receiving special education services. Teacher reports indicate that approximately 10% of the least-engaged students were receiving special education assistance. Most literature shows that students judged by teachers as displaying behavioral problems are likely to be referred to special education; and in our data, there was a significant relation between teachers' rating and children's reports on their own behavioral engagement. However, one reason for the fact that low engagement is not related to referrals or receipt of special education services may be because in this study, students rate themselves. Personal estimates of conduct, effort, and participation are likely to be more positive than are those of the teacher.

Surprisingly, least-engaged students are not necessarily low achievers, relative to other children in these schools. With some exceptions (e.g., Marks, 2000), most literature that finds a relation between engagement and student achievement measures engagement via teacher reports, not student self-reports. In addition, the range of student achievement in this study of urban youngsters was more restricted and skewed toward lower scores as compared to the range and levels found in suburban settings. The results suggest that the least engaged urban fourth- and fifth-grade students are not necessarily behaviorally out of control or doing poorly academically. Case studies presented later provide examples of students who are low engaged but not low achievers.

***Individual and Context Contributions to Engagement.*** Although the engagement clusters appeared to represent valid and meaningful configurations of students' behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement, we were also interested in knowing how much of the differences between these profiles were attributable to the individual characteristics of the students or to their classroom settings. To answer that question, we used a technique known as HLM (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992). In general, we found that variance in all three aspects of engagement was due largely to individual differ-

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<sup>2</sup>Although the relation between race/ethnicity and engagement interests us, school policy forbade our gathering information relevant to this question.

ences. For affective engagement, for example, 17% of the variance was due to classroom-level differences whereas 83% was due to the individual differences between students. It is important to note, however, that the variability in engagement across classrooms, although smaller than the individual variation between students, was nevertheless still significant and high for educational research.

## CONTEXT

Our study explores context from the perceptions of participants in it. We use survey and interview responses of students to questions about their schools and classrooms to describe perceptions of teacher-student and peer relationships, work, and work norms. We present ratings of these dimensions, consider how much individual differences contribute to the ratings, and again use person-centered analyses to examine profiles of student perceptions of context.

### Perceptions of Classroom Features and Relationships Among Them

On the whole, students were positive about their teachers, peers, the work, and work norms. Means on the surveys ranged from a high of 3.75 (for teacher support) to a low of 3.2 (for work norms), with a potential highpoint of 5.0. All context perceptions were significantly intercorrelated, ranging from  $r = .39$  for teacher support and task challenge, to a low of  $r = .19$  for task challenge and classroom work orientation. These correlations are considerably less than what was found for the three dimensions of engagement, discussed earlier. The data suggest that student perceptions influence each other, but at the same time, students discriminate considerably among these different areas. This finding is similar to those reported in studies of family and work environments with adults; ratings of one area tend to spill over to ratings of another (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976).

### Individual and Classroom Contributions to Context Perceptions

How much do individual differences affect context perceptions? How similar are student perceptions in the same classroom? Our HLM analyses revealed that variance in student-teacher relationship ratings was largely due to individual differences (22% of the variance). A greater proportion of the variance in individual perceptions of classroom work norms was due to

classroom-level differences (32%), although differences across students were still much larger.

The greater commonality in perceptions of work norms than in work challenge or teacher support makes sense. Work norms are explicit rules that reflect class-level expectations for completing work and staying on task. By contrast, task challenge and teacher support are not articulated for the students, and are subject to the expectations, needs, and skills each student brings to the classroom at the beginning of the year. Teachers, too, may in fact offer some students more support than others.

### What Students Say About Context

Interview responses help create a deeper and more detailed notion of how students experience their environments, which factors are most salient and why, and help us better understand how these experiences relate to engagement. We were especially interested in hearing what urban children in well-functioning schools had to say in light of the many negative characterizations of inner-city schools and their impacts on students (e.g., Kozol, 1991).

Overall, these youngsters describe their school lives in ways that sound very much like what Philip Jackson wrote about many decades ago in his classic, *Life in Classrooms* (1968). Jackson described school as a place where there are two curriculums. In addition to "reading, 'riting, and 'rithmetic," there is another curriculum of rules, regulations, and routines which shapes learning of the first curriculum. Forty years later, students still talk about routines and rules and their reactions to them.<sup>3</sup> They dwell on work that is boring or repetitive; of some things that are a respite from boredom either because a subject interests them personally or because it is novel and varies from the daily routine like projects, special events, or time off as a reward when all work has been completed. They talk about work that is too easy and express frustration with work that is too hard. Differences in the mix of perceptions about difficulty, repetitiveness, and appeal affect student ratings of work challenge. These differences as we show later are important features of whether students are engaged.

The students we interviewed talked about the school in positive ways. Three quarters said the staff was fair and cared about kids. Over half said

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<sup>3</sup>Since then, others have created similar descriptions of education in the United States and England (e.g., *A Place Called School: Prospects for the Future*, by John Goodlad, 1984; *Emotional Experiences in the Classroom*, by Andrew Pollard & Ann Filer, 1999; *The Social World of Pupil Career: Strategic Biographies Through Primary School*, by Andrew Pollard & Ann Filer, 2000). The fact that there has been little change in what students say in 40 years and in two different societies seems surprising; however, writings by educational historians Tyack and Cuban (1995) suggested it should not be. They assert that what goes on in classrooms has not changed much in 100 years.

there was someone besides the teacher who they could talk to or ask for help. They saw the school as a safe haven, whereas many raised concerns about coming to and leaving school. They saw the security guard as protecting them from harm. Teachers were characterized as confidants and advisors when there are personal problems, as helpers when there are work difficulties, and as cheerleaders when students perform well. Students also talked about the teacher as disciplinarian, as dispenser of special privileges and prizes when students behave or finish work and of punishment when they don't. All see their teachers as champions of the value of learning and advocates of schooling as the gateway to a positive future. Although 94% of youngsters interviewed said they like their teacher, views of how the teacher performs these roles—help, support, and disciplinary fairness—influence ratings of teacher–student relationships.

The children were quite detailed and emotionally involved when discussing peer relations and behavior; 66% said their classmates like and help them. Almost all have a classmate they admire and have a good friend. They talked extensively about who follows the rules, who misbehaves, and who teases. Teasing was one of the few problems mentioned between children of different racial, ethnic, or social backgrounds. In fact, almost all thought the school was a “good place for children like me.”

One element that stands out in our interviews is frequent references to what the children called “fighting.” Many students talked about fighting among peers and about their own participation in fighting. Their descriptions suggest that this “fighting” is not meant to inflict physical harm, but is instead fooling around—roughhousing, tussling, teasing, and taunting—that sometimes gets out of hand. Even when it does not, children get into trouble because the behavior disrupts classroom order. Many, even the ones that participate, are troubled by the fact that this “fighting” results in teachers yelling and interferes with getting work done. This fooling around and how teachers respond to it affect perceptions of whether time is used well, whether assignments get done, and thus, ratings of work norms. The failure to get work done also fuels children's worry about performance on yearly high-stakes tests in reading and math, which determine whether they must attend summer school and whether they are promoted.

What stands out is that that most students in the upper elementary school grades believed in school and they saw schoolwork and learning as the heart of the school's legitimacy and saw it as a route to success. Nevertheless, as we discuss next, despite this belief, some students, who are having trouble doing the work or find little about it that interests them, already show signs of disengagement. Whether their commitment to school might be further shaken as they pass into middle school is a question for future study.

## Patterns of Classroom Perceptions

Earlier we provided a general description of what children said about their experiences in school. In this section, we discuss how experiences of different aspects of the classroom fit together. Typically, prior literature on engagement has examined perceptions of single aspects of the classroom context (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, Friedel, & Paris, in press). However, children do not experience these aspects of the environment in isolation from each other. Thus, the most common analysis strategy does not tell us about how context perceptions are patterned and how these patterns relate to engagement. Consequently, we applied the same logic and analytic procedures to students' perceptions of their classrooms, as was the case for our engagement analyses discussed earlier. More specifically, we cluster analyzed the Year 2 ratings of classroom experience from the surveys: work challenge, work norms, and student-teacher and peer relationships. Our choice of cluster solutions was guided by the same set of factors noted earlier in the section on engagement clusters.

Four patterns of classroom perceptions appeared in the data (see Fig. 7.2). Not surprisingly (given the significant correlations among the survey scales, discussed earlier), where children felt positively toward one dimension they also tended to be positive about the others, but these connec-

**Student Perceptions of Classroom Context**  
(Sample Sizes in Parentheses)

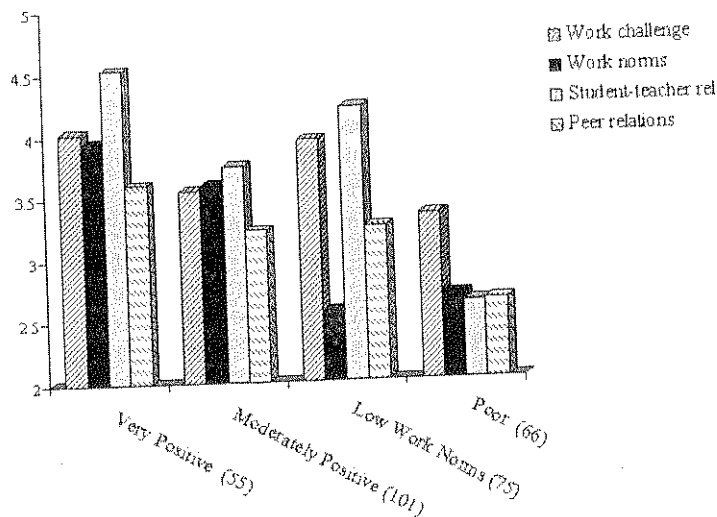


FIG. 7.2. Clusters of classroom contexts.

tions were less pronounced than among the three dimensions of engagement. Even so, two of the four clusters showed quite divergent patterns among the context perceptions.

Students in the Very Positive cluster have the most favorable perceptions of each aspect of the environment. Children in this category were pleased, on the whole, with their teachers, the work they assigned, the way other children were committed to that work, and the peer ties they had formed there. As in most of the other clusters, children expressed particular satisfaction with their teachers. Children in the Low Work cluster, in contrast to the children in the two first clusters, were relatively positive about everything but the work norms in their classrooms. These children, who comprise one quarter of those we interviewed, saw the teacher as supportive but seemed concerned that the tasks they considered to be fairly challenging were not being completed because of poor work norms. In contrast, for children in Cluster 4, labeled Poor, nothing was seen as really good except that they found the schoolwork to be challenging—and as we discuss later, perhaps too challenging, given how they perceive other elements of their context.

### **Relation of Student Context Perceptions and Their Engagement**

In this section, we provide both qualitative and quantitative evidence of links between student views of context and their engagement. First, we consider the association between engagement profiles and profiles of context perceptions. Then we use case studies to illustrate differences in types of low-engaged students based on analyses of interview responses, with particular attention to students' views of their classroom environments, their own abilities, behaviors, and related feelings.

Differences in perceptions between children in the high- and low-engaged clusters (see Fig. 7.1) were not surprising. Students whose engagement profiles indicated distance from school are overrepresented in the least favorable patterns of classroom perceptions and underrepresented in the most favorable. For example, of the 103 students who were categorized as either Disengaged or Low Engaged, 65% of them were in the Low Work Norms and Poor classroom perception groups. In contrast, 73 (66%) of the 111 Highly Engaged or Moderately Engaged students were found to be in the two highest-rated classroom types.

### ***Types of Disengaged Students***

Although least-engaged students regularly have less favorable perceptions of their school environments than do their more engaged peers, the central themes of their discomfiture are not uniform. Our interviews of 40



students, taken from the lowest quartile of each grade's overall engagement score, were inductively categorized based on what they said about academic work and classroom work norms, and about their relations with teachers and peers. The interviews permit us a nuanced look at the qualities of low engagement, a brief version of which we present here. We find three types of low-engaged students and provide descriptions and cases that characterize each type.

***The Truly Disaffected.*** Some students seemingly cannot be "grabbed" by schools, for they are truly disaffected. These students don't like school; they often perceive themselves to be neglected or having difficulty with teachers, peers, or both. They are uninterested in and apathetic about schoolwork. They report being in trouble often and don't seem to care. Most describe the teacher negatively; they say the teacher is mean and yells. Worse yet, many describe their teacher as unfair, picking on them for punishment when others deserve it as well.

The truly disaffected often do not like any academic subject, and almost all proclaim explicit dislike for multiple academic subjects. For those who like a particular subject, only one subject holds their attention and their words reflect stark contrast between how they feel about this subject versus the others with which they must cope. Their affective engagement, not surprisingly, is slight. And so, they often get into trouble. Even among those who say that they can do the work, almost none report studying or reviewing what they are supposed to be learning. Almost all express negative feelings about schoolwork; they say they are bored, not interested in or excited about what they are learning. These feelings are reflected in their low ratings of emotional engagement. Many either don't care or are ambivalent about this. Although half the students say they like their classmates, or have a few friends, they all report peer misbehavior, either directed toward them or more generally toward others in the class which results in work not getting done and wasted time.

Ryan, an example of a truly disengaged student, is 11 years old and in the fourth grade. His mother and grandmother tell him not to behave poorly and he makes it clear that he needs to pass out of fourth grade "so you don't grow up and be a crack head or [left back] be seven foot tall in fifth grade." But few academic matters retain his interest. Gym and recess are the best times in the school day. He enjoys what he considers the fun things at school such as field trips, watching movies, dancing, watching TV, and having parties; but he doesn't see these as connected with learning, or at making learning "fun."

Ryan's favorite subject is drawing. Sometimes, he likes math, "like when I do money and all that. Like at my daddy's store when somebody comes in and wants to buy something, I gets the money in the cash register." But

also, he mentions that he can get confused and bored when they do math. He says most of the work is getting harder and harder. School, in his account, is set off pretty sharply against fun. He speaks wearily, for instance, of "boring stuff like reading . . . and, I don't like that because it be making me all sleepy."

Ryan interprets the teacher's frequent field trips, movies, TV, and other specials as a sign that the teacher cares; furthermore, he understands that the teacher's assignments are because "he wants us to pass." Yet still, he interprets his teacher's reprimands as an unjust singling him out for punishment; he hates it that his teacher yells a lot when kids are bad and won't listen when they try to explain what happened. School is confusing. "Every time Mrs. Z [the teacher's assistant] tell us to do something, and he [the teacher] always coming in and yelling at us and then we try to tell him and he never let us get our words out."

According to Ryan, other students wrongly accuse him of misbehaving. "Kids . . . start stuff because of what I didn't say. I hate when they do that." School alienates Ryan, according to his account, because other kids choose to misunderstand his playfulness. "Sometimes the kids be mean. Like one time I wanted to hit Tanya 'cause I was just playing with her. I tell her something, I just tap her and she says, 'I'm gonna tell on you.' And then she tells on me and that's when I got in trouble." Asked what's important to him at school, Ryan responded "I'm important to me because I don't want to get hurt." But he's used to getting into trouble, and has learned not to mind it much, even if he loses recess or has notes sent home. "In my mind I don't care he put my name on the board and I don't care cause I have enough time to play."

**The Strugglers.** A second group of students, the strugglers, are trying to do well, but not making it; they are, at least marginally, aware of that fact. Unlike their truly disengaged peers, these students are interested in some subjects, say they persist, but they are frustrated by challenging work and prefer things that are easier or more fun. They recognize the need to improve and worry about failure.

All students in this group acknowledge getting in trouble, half of them for social reasons (i.e., fighting or other peer conflict) and the other half for not paying attention or not doing homework and some for both. Most say that they try to avoid getting in trouble but don't manage to, so that their interviews are peppered by descriptions of disciplinary incidents. Unlike the disaffected students, most strugglers describe their teachers in positive terms, caring and helpful with work, although they sometimes recount occasions when the teacher was unfair or overly punitive.

The strugglers' perceptions of peers are mixed; most have friends but a few do not. They talk about student misbehavior but not with the same in-

tensity as the truly disaffected students. Like the disaffected students, these youngsters are mixed in their reactions to peers. A majority say they have friends but also some students who they don't like or fight with. A few say that their relationships with peers are uniformly negative.

Yolanda, a typical struggler, said, "I would make the day shorter and shorter," when asked what she would change about school. Nowadays, Yolanda told us, she did have some fun in class "like every Friday 'cause we get extra recess and stuff," where, no doubt, there were opportunities to "play double dutch," one of her favorite activities.

Her favorite in-school activities were music and gym. This year, for the first time, writing was her favorite academic subject "because sometimes we get to write like our own stories and stuff." In writing "we read stuff to learn how to write it and it make me want to be like a writer." Reading, Yolanda's old favorite subject, "be interesting, all the time," and she often made use of reading out of class "to get clues from the books and stuff" to write about. Yolanda found science "exciting," too, "all the time." She also told us that a few kids look up to her "cause I never got suspended and I get good grades," and that some other kids tease her for the same reasons. We are skeptical, however, of her reputation for scholarship.

Often, but not all the time, math and social studies "confused" Yolanda; they were her least favorite subjects. Of math she said, "Sometimes it be hard and stuff," and when "I say you [the teacher] explain it too fast and she [the teacher] said I explain it already." Math would be better "if it wouldn't be so hard and stuff." Yolanda's response to this challenge was to be "bored sometimes." She also sought help: "Sometimes I wait a while and I get the teacher to help me," but she didn't always think she got the help she needed. Yolanda feels she needs to get better grades in math and social studies, and has a strategy for improving her grades that somehow doesn't inspire confidence in view of her self-described passivity in school: "if I just try harder and pass the test, it will be easy."

In fact, school was a trial. In Yolanda's view, teasing and fighting pervaded her school life. A few kids "talk about you a lot and you get your feelings hurt." Teachers were fair and caring ("they buy you stuff even though you don't probably deserve it")—a theme that Yolanda brought up yet again later in the interview. But teachers were also beleaguered by rambunctious students in ways that proved detrimental to the work norms and climate of the classroom. "Every time a student is hollering" at the teachers "they don't do nothing to them, just tell them to calm down and give them another chance." Unlike her class last year, Yolanda says, "in this class we always getting in trouble." Sometimes her teacher "gets mad at us and she tell us that, but we don't know why she mad at us."

Bored by work she found confusing and lacking a successful strategy for overcoming her confusion, experiencing the classroom as chaotic, Yolanda

said resignedly about school, "sometimes it be's the longest stay." When our persistent interviewer asked whether she was referring to the school day or the school year, Yolanda said simply, "both."

**Socially Troubled.** The socially troubled are interested in academics, but their interviews are full of heart-rending accounts of fighting and teasing. They may have friends, but their relationships with other classmates are, overall, negative, leaving them feeling as if they don't belong. These students, however, actually express positive affect about schoolwork. They are interested in academic subjects, and even are excited by some. They are willing to persist at hard assignments and often mention strategies they use to learn material they find difficult. Like the two other groups, they see the need to improve grades, but unlike the other two, they are being somewhat strategic in making this happen.

About half of the socially troubled mention getting in trouble for fighting, saying they are responding to provocation rather than instigating the altercations. They see themselves as the victims of aggressive social behavior. They also talk about being teased, feeling left out or harassed by others. Nevertheless, almost all say they have friends. Thus, these youngsters are not necessarily ostracized or withdrawn. They seem to be unable to manage or deflect the frequent teasing, taunting, or physical interactions that occur among their classmates. Also, these children are generally more positive about their teachers than are their disaffected and struggling counterparts. Like the others, however, they show concern about their teacher's reaction to misbehavior.

Darryl, a 10-year-old fourth grader, is very positive about academics and about his teacher, but his peers so distress him that he is disaffected by school. He talks about his pleasure in working on the computer, and tells us that his favorite subjects are math and science. Asked what things about school make him feel good about himself, his answer is one that would hardly be expected from a disengaged child: "I get good grades and I'm smart; I'm like a math genius, everybody calls me Einstein." And, indeed, he usually pays attention even when schoolwork is hard. He sometimes takes books out of the library and went on in some detail about new science facts in them that he discussed with his teacher.

Despite this, his school is a trial for Darryl; dealing with schoolmates is a problem that often overcomes him. "When I get in trouble, can't control myself and I hit kids." We asked him if it troubles him to get into trouble this way, and his answer was mixed: "Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't"—so far have the challenges of making a stable place for himself among the children in a so-so school taxed him. It's not that there are no kids he considers friends. And because he gets to tutor classmates in math, he says

kids admire him because he can tell the answer so quickly and they laugh at his jokes. He likes that. But he finds that lots of the kids are mean and taunt him for being smart. He feels more challenged than supported by his peers. When we asked him "what don't you like about your class," he responded that "sometimes the kids in my class threaten me more than anybody else. They pick on me," although his particular friend in class tries to "cheer him up." But he says he is often frustrated at school "when people try to tell me what to do all the time, when people get into fights with me."

He is sensitive to friction between Black and White children, and to the number of students who get in trouble for fighting and not working. About half of the kids, he estimates, don't care when the teacher gets mad, and this bothers him. From his perspective, the only time she gets mean is when kids don't stop "acting up" even after she tells them to stop. He likes her, and he thinks that he will remember her and in this light, "how much fun it was." She helps kids, he says, and does nice things for the class, such as giving pizza parties, and buying each student a Christmas present.

## DISCUSSION

Engagement affects how students navigate through school. Our work examines the engagement of urban elementary school-age youngsters. They attend neighborhood schools nominated as well-functioning; in comparison with other schools in the district, they have stable administrations, positive and safe environments for learning, programs designed to improve test scores and average achievement, which at the time of the study was still well below state levels. The population they serve is very poor and overwhelmingly minority. By working with these schools, rather than highly resourced or boutique schools, we explore what is possible rather than what might be achieved under ideal circumstances.

Whereas most studies examine one type of engagement or combine types, we used person-centered analyses to examine patterns of behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement and their influence of context on engagement. Our emphasis on low-engaged students provides insight into how context affects entry into a potentially problematic pathway. We found six patterns of engagement that replicated over 2 years of data collection. Generally, within each pattern, ratings of behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement were similar; the overall level of engagement ranged from quite high to very low. As with most classroom studies, HLM analyses revealed that these patterns of engagement are more influenced by individual differences than context, which was still significant. Students have a long history in school by the late elementary grades; their engagement may be

established earlier and be fairly stable, although somewhat amenable to classroom variation by late middle childhood. Of course, because we worked in one type of environment, it is possible that under more extreme circumstances, either more positive or negative, variation in engagement may more strongly reflect influences of context. Obviously, families and out-of-school experience influence engagement so that combining these results with work in other areas should provide a richer picture of engagement.

It is important to note, however, that context perceptions did influence engagement and in some surprising ways. Most studies ask about social aspects of classrooms like relationships with teachers and peers; fewer studies ask about work and almost none deal with both domains simultaneously. Most intriguing, we found that work challenge and work norms were strongly related to each type of engagement. When we looked at patterns of classroom perceptions, they showed that high-engaged students were more likely to be in positive perception clusters where the work was seen as challenging, varied, and thought-provoking, teachers and peers as supportive, and the environment as one where students are expected to stay on task, get work done, and behave themselves. Low-engaged students were significantly more likely to be represented in clusters with perceptions of low teacher and peer support, poor work norms, and challenging tasks. This combination, we speculate, leads to frustration as students struggle to get work done in situations where they feel that there is low support and that work time is wasted as instruction is interrupted by peer misbehavior.

### **Low Engagement—Slipping Off the Path**

Stereotypes about inner-city youngsters suggest that these children are not engaged in school. The popular image is that these children do poorly in school, that school is not relevant to their lives, and that they are disaffected and reject what school has to offer. Our findings do not match these stereotypes in that there were many students whose patterns of engagement were moderate to high. However, approximately one third of the students, predominantly boys, were what we consider low engaged and disaffected. These students rated the context less favorably and were more mixed in their comments during interviews. Surprisingly, these children were not more likely to be receiving special education services. And they were not lower achievers as compared to their peers, perhaps because the range of achievement in these schools is very truncated, skewed toward the low end.

From interviews, we identified differences among these least-engaged students. One type, the disaffected, has multiple problems. They seem most at risk for school failure. They are in trouble for misbehaving, don't like and

are frustrated by the work, and usually are somewhat negative about the teacher. They recognize the need to improve but aren't doing much about it. These students sound apathetic and bored; school has little to offer except for extras like gym and music. Yet they do not sound "hard core." They do not "reject" the legitimacy of the school or the value of learning. These are troubled youngsters, rather than rebellious adolescents. To get back on track they need academic help, a classroom that is tightly run, and work that has some variety and meaning along with academic support. Creating more hospitable environments will not necessarily help such students. Enforcing higher standards won't either.

A second type, the strugglers, is less negative than the first group, but could become so. They, too, are in trouble for misbehaving. Yet, they are interested in some work, although they find it hard and sometimes frustrating. In comparison with their disaffected classmates, they sound more committed to trying to improve although they are not necessarily succeeding. They also are more positive about the teacher. For these youngsters, academic help and a firm hand in running the room might be most helpful to decrease off-task misbehavior and problems with doing the work.

The third type, the socially troubled, are positive about academics and even excited by some of what they learn. Although they have friends, they have problems with peer interactions. These students might be aided by some counseling in social skills or flexible classroom arrangements so that they could be moved out of difficult situations with peers.

The findings have implications for policy and for pathways. The task that remains is how to create interventions to increase the quality of low-engaged student experiences. Our work suggests that there is not a single solution—a "one size fits all" intervention is not adequate to ameliorate student problems. It also highlights that attending to the nature of classwork and classroom work norms would be a productive first step. Many approaches to reform start with improving climate as a route to improving student engagement in learning. Our work certainly suggests that relationships are important, but the assumption that this will lead to greater engagement without direct attention to classwork may be unfounded.

What does this mean for policy? First, raising standards without providing help for students may further alienate the disengaged and struggling students. The fact that few of the least-engaged students were receiving special help, that budget cuts make this possibility less likely, is not encouraging. In addition, given that many of the least-engaged students report that the work is boring and repetitive and that they like the "extras," such as art, music, and computers, a focus on testing that results in increased drill-and-practice instruction or in elimination of a variety of subjects in favor of those tested is likely to further alienate such youngsters. The fact that students are responsive to their contexts also suggests that changes may re-

sult in heightened engagement. These changes are not likely to work if they are focused only on social or only on academic aspects of context.

The study shows that middle childhood is the time to intervene to reduce disengagement. For the most part, these youngsters do not reject school; nevertheless, given their dissatisfaction and the impending move from elementary school, it is likely that as they enter middle school, disengagement will be exacerbated. Considerable work shows that the transition is difficult for students, that the environment is less supportive. Moreover, peer pressure and risk behavior become more prevalent. Therefore, it is important to identify and help these students before their problems are more intractable and even harder to resolve.

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# DEVELOPMENTAL PATHWAYS THROUGH MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

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and Diversity as Resources*

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