

# Students' engagement in school and family variables: A literature review

## *Envolvimento dos alunos na escola e variáveis familiares: uma revisão da literatura*

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### Abstract

"Students' engagement in school" is regarded in the literature as a current and valued construct despite the lack of empirical studies on its relationship with specific family variables. The present research aimed to survey studies on the correlation between students' engagement in school and family contexts, specifically in terms of the following variables: perceived parental support, socioeconomic and sociocultural levels, perceived rights, and parental educational styles. In order to describe the state of the art of student's "engagement in school" and "family variables", a narrative review was conducted. The studies reviewed highlight the role of family as a context with significance in student's engagement in school. However, further research is needed to deepen the knowledge of this topic considering potential mediator variables, either personal or school variables. It was also found the need for a psychosocial intervention aimed at providing support for the students coming from adverse family contexts who exhibit low level of engagement associated with poor academic achievement and a higher probability of dropping out.

**Keywords:** Academic achievement; Family relations; Psychologist education; School engagement; Teacher education.

### Resumo

*A valorização e a atualidade do construto "envolvimento dos alunos na escola" têm sido salientadas na literatura teórica, observando-se, no entanto, falta de estudos empíricos acerca da sua relação com variáveis familiares específicas. A presente investigação teve por finalidade analisar as pesquisas acerca das relações entre o envolvimento dos alunos na escola e os contextos familiares, especificamente as variáveis: suporte parental percebido, níveis socioeconômico e*

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sociocultural, direitos percebidos e estilos educativos parentais. Para descrever o estado da arte do presente tema, "envolvimento na escola", e as "variáveis familiares", a metodologia utilizada foi a revisão da literatura de tipo narrativa. Os estudos revistos destacam a importância da família como contexto com influências significativas no envolvimento dos alunos na escola. Detectou-se a necessidade de aprofundar os estudos existentes, tendo em conta possíveis variáveis mediadoras, quer de natureza pessoal quer de tipo escolar, bem como de uma intervenção psicossocial aos alunos que, vindos de contextos familiares adversos, apresentam fraco envolvimento e rendimento escolares e uma maior probabilidade de abandono dos estudos.

**Palavras-chave:** *Envolvimento escolar; Relações familiares; Formação de psicólogos; Rendimento escolar; Formação de professores.*

The issue of family as a factor influencing children's school experiences is often addressed in research on educational outcomes (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012). Although the literature underlines the impact of peer group on student attitudes and behaviors, particularly during adolescence (Keefe & Berndt, 1996; Rubin, Bukowski, Parker, & Bowker, 2008), a substantial number of studies on student engagement in school have focused on adult influence (Gest, Rulison, Davidson, Welsh, & Domitrovich, 2008). Several aspects of family context have been considered, especially socioeconomic and sociocultural characteristics (Boxer, Goldstein, DeLorenzo, Savoy, & Mercado, 2011; Chau, Baumann, Kabuth, & Chau, 2012; Davis-Kean, 2005; Gohain, 2012; Parker et al., 2012), family relationships (Chen, 2008; Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Hughes & Kwok, 2007), students' perceptions of family support (N. Bowen & Bowen, 1998; Veiga, 2009; Wentzel, 1998), and parenting practices (Baumrind, 1983; Simons-Morton & Haynie, 2002; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) described two different forms of involvement through which the influence of family may occur: direct influence, by intentional support and indirect influence, through the transmission of beliefs and modeling behavior. Bempechat and Shernoff (2012) indicate three ways a family can influence student engagement in school: assistance with homework; parenting style; and transmission of values. The literature suggests a reduction of family involvement, particularly parental influence, during middle school (Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003; Spera, 2005). The literature review conducted considered the following family variables to address students' engagement in school: perceived parental support,

socioeconomic and sociocultural levels, perceived rights, family authority styles, and educational practices.

In order to describe the state of the art of Student's engagement in school and family variables, a narrative review was conducted. The method applied entailed systematic searching, reviewing, and writing to bring together key themes and findings of research in this field. A search for recent publications was conducted in scientific databases such as SciELO, Lilacs, and Ebsco Host (including: Academic Search Complete, Education Source, Eric, PsycArticles, PsycINFO, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, PsycBooks, and PsycTests), web Portals, (Science Direct or the Scientific Open Access Repository of Portugal), handbooks, and Phd theses. The review was conducted using relevant keywords. The objectives of the present study were considered when setting the criteria (full document available and articles written in English) used to select eligible studies. The review of the available literature focused on identifying and analyzing cutting-edge research topics and their importance, as well as research lines. It was based on the engagement of students in school in terms of the following variables: perceived family support, socioeconomic and sociocultural levels, perceived rights at home, and parenting style.

### **Perceived parental support and students' engagement in school**

Within the framework of research on motivation and family contribution to students' school transition (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999), two parenting dimensions have been highlighted:

parental involvement (provision of resources) and autonomy support (seeing the student as an active individual). These dimensions are of great interest since they contribute to the student's autonomy to carry out academic activities and to maintain a good academic performance and a strong sense of competence. These dimensions may also attenuate difficulties and act as facilitators of transitions. Several studies report the association between these parental variables and student functioning indexes during school transitions (Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Ratelle, Guay, Larose, & Senécal, 2004).

Another study focused on the way parental support influences students' academic results. The effects of this type of support were investigated by Grolnick and Slowiaczek (1994) using two models: a direct effect model (i.e., parental variables can act by transmitting skills necessary for school success) and an indirect effect model (i.e., parental variables can act as facilitators of children's motivation to engage through the parents' involvement in school by establishing communication and encouraging school-related conversations). Children's academic learning is positively affected when families foster a challenging and motivating learning environment (Schunk & Mullen, 2012; Schunk & Pajares, 2009). Parents' involvement in their children's homework may, according to Bempechat and Shernoff (2012), promote learning and support the development of time management and problem solving strategies exerting a positive impact on students' perception of self-competence (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994).

Several authors have addressed a relation between parental support and academic outcomes. Parental support was related to better school attendance, higher grades, and fewer behavioral problems in a study carried out by N. Bowen and Bowen (1998). Mothers' interest and involvement in their children's education were associated with better school results in a study conducted by Englund, Luckner, Whaley, and Egeland (2004), with 187 low socioeconomic elementary school children. Simon-Morton and Chen (2009) studied 2,453 middle-school students and found, on the one hand, over-time positive and significant associations

between student engagement in school and family expectations, and parental monitoring, on the other hand. The association between these variables was mediated by the schoolmate relationships.

Veiga and Antunes (2005) investigated 365 7<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> grade students and found a significant relationship between motivation towards school work and parental support. Another study conducted by Aunola, Nurmi, Lerkkanen, and Rasku-Puttonen (2003), revealed that parents' opinion about their children's mathematics ability was related to their performance. The children whose parents believed in their mathematics abilities had better results in that subject. Perhaps, due to their positive views, parents provided more challenging tasks and opportunities for mathematics problems solving (Musun-Miller & Blevins-Knabe, 1998). Another hypothesis proposed by Aunola et al. (2003) is that parents who realistically believe in their children's mathematics abilities are, themselves, proficient in that domain and, therefore, exhibit positive attitudes towards mathematics (Huntsinger, Jose, Liaw, & Ching, 1997). Results also show that the children's higher achievement in mathematics, in turn, improved the parents' opinion about their descendants' skills (Parsons, Kaczala, & Meece, 1982; Phillips, 1987).

Perceived parental support was related to a greater academic motivation and a positive individual goal orientation, affecting students' cognitive engagement, in a study carried out by Wentzel (1998). Some studies (Veiga, 1988, 2001) found a significant relationship between academic self-concept and perceived parental support. In another study conducted with 649 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> graders, Veiga (2009) found significant differences in violence among students who perceived low and high levels of parental support: students who perceived low level of parental support considered themselves more violent.

### **Family socioeconomic and sociocultural level and students' engagement in school**

The studies reviewed suggest that family exerts considerable influence on children's academic

self-efficacy through modeling behavior and by family capital and resources (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), which refer to material aspects, such as family income; human resources, such as education; and social network. Cultural capital encompasses particular family knowledge and skills valued by schools, for example, using a computer, fostering extracurricular activities, encouraging trips to libraries and museums, attending current cultural events, and stimulating intellectual discussions. According to Henry, Cavanagh, and Oetting (2011), more educated parents are more likely to invest in practices related to better academic achievement, such as providing supplementary learning experiences, assisting with homework, steering the path towards graduation and postsecondary education. They may also feel more comfortable communicating or intervening at school. On the other hand, parents with lower educational level may feel less empowered and, therefore, less able to intervene in the school context or influence their children's academic behaviors.

The literature suggests the impact of the parents' educational and personal background on their children's education. For instance, the relationship between the family sociocultural level and student academic outcomes, parental educational qualification of mother and father has been considered together and separately. Some studies suggest the existence of significant relationships between these variables (Adesemowo & Adenuga, 1998; Sticht & Weinstein-Shr, 2005): the higher the parental academic qualification, the better the students' academic achievement (Hanushek, 1986). Davis-Kean (2005) investigated the relationship between socioeconomic and sociocultural levels (parents' education and income) and children's school performance through parents' beliefs and behaviors in a sample of 8-12 year-olds. The author found that the socioeconomic factors were related to children's academic achievement; parent's years of schooling was also found to be an important factor.

A study carried out by Chau et al. (2012) in France included European and non-European immigrant middle-school adolescents. In addition

to risk behaviors and physical and mental health variables, these authors examined the role of several socioeconomic variables, including the father's occupation and family income, quality of life (as measured by the World Health Organization-Quality of life), grade repetition rates, academic performance, and school dropout ideation. When compared with French students, European immigrants were more affected by grade repetition: 24% of the risk variance was explained by the father's occupation and family structure. Non-European immigrants were more affected in terms of grade repetition, low academic performance, and school dropout ideation: 35% of the risk variance was explained by father's occupation and family structure. The contribution of socioeconomic characteristics, unhealthy behaviors, and physical and mental health was higher for non-European than for European immigrant students.

Gohain (2012) sought to find out whether the fathers' socioeconomic status (professional occupation and years of schooling) was related to academic performance in a sample of Indian adolescents (aged 16-17 years), who were about to take the high school entrance national exam. This author found significant differences in academic performance according to socioeconomic level, in favor of the students whose fathers had higher status. The same result was found considering the father's income.

Lareau (2000) found that working-class parents of Euro-American elementary-school children were less involved in home learning activities with their children and were less likely to establish relationships with teachers and get involved in school life than middle class parents. In another study (2002), the same author included middle and lower-class African-American parents and concluded that social class is a primary determinant of educational socialization of children and of their perception of competence, especially for the middle class. Bempechat and Shernoff (2012) suggest that school disengagement and low academic performance are more intense for students living in poverty.

Liu and Lu (2009) conducted a study in a sample of 9<sup>th</sup> grade Chinese students to investigate the relationship between their families' socioeconomic status (based on an index which included parents' ownership of goods, occupation, and years of schooling) and their academic performance. They found a significant relationship between family socioeconomic status and student academic performance: the higher the socioeconomic status, the higher the students' likelihood of having better grades in mathematics and stronger literacy skills in their native language. Woessmann (2003) analyzed data collected from "Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study" for Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Thailand. The author found a significant relationship between family's educational level and student's performance. Results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2004) also indicate that social class is related to academic outcomes. It was found that belonging to a lower class was not associated with poor academic performance, and belonging to a higher class did not guarantee better performance.

Other studies have been carried out addressing the context of higher education. Tavani and Losh (2003) studied the relationships among academic achievement (grades), expectations, motivation, and self-confidence in 4,012 students with mean age of 19 years, during a university summer program. Parent's years of schooling (less than high school, high school, college, and graduate school) were considered predictors of children's academic performance, by indirect influence through parents' beliefs and involvement in their children's education.

Some studies suggest that the effect of the mothers' years of schooling is different from that of the fathers' schooling. McEwan (2003), in a study with Chilean students attending 8<sup>th</sup> grade, found that the mothers' years of schooling has a stronger effect on individual achievement. On the other hand, Park and Hannum (2001) studied the effects of family socioeconomic level (mother's and father's years of schooling) on elementary students'

academic performance. They found a positive and significant effect of the fathers' educational level on their children's mathematics achievement, but not in their literacy skills.

Some other studies, however, suggest a weak or not significant relationship between family educational level and academic aspects. Leaper, Farkas, and Brown (2012) investigated a sample of 579 girls aged between 13 and 18 and found that their parents' educational level was not a significant motivating factor. Loeber and Higson (2009), studying a sample of 200 A-level students from Germany and the United Kingdom, found a positive and significant (although weak) correlation between the decision to pursue higher education and German students of parents with high level of education. The same result was not found among the British students. Considering the socioeconomic level (occupations and parental educational level), Loeber and Higson (2009) did not find significant correlations between the group of students evaluated. Alarcon and Edwards (2013), in a study with first-year college students, found no significant relationship between the parent's educational level and student retention.

### **Students' perceived rights in the family and school contexts**

In spite of the general lack of research on young people's rights in different life contexts (Jordan & Goodey, 1996; Symonides, 1998; United Nations Educational and Cultural Organization, 1998; Veiga, 2007), it was possible to identify some studies on students' rights in the school context and at home, both in the international and national contexts.

In the international setting, it is worth mentioning a study by Hart, Pavlovic, and Zneidner (2001), which was conducted in 1993 and comprised 23 countries, including Portugal. This study highlighted not only the perception of existence of rights within family and school contexts (Hart et al., 2001), but also the students' recognition of the importance of their rights. The instrument used was composed of 40 items based on the

United Nations' human rights. The sample included participants of both sexes, aged between 12 and 14, from diverse sociocultural levels. In most countries, the study considered the importance and existence of rights, in the context of home and school. It was observed less perception of existence of rights at school than in the family context. Girls reported more perception of rights than the boys, both at home and at school. There were also differences according to the socioeconomic status. With regards to the mothers' educational level, the differences relied on the importance of rights at home (10 countries), existence of rights at home (11 countries), importance of rights at school (8 countries), and existence of rights at school (6 countries). As for the fathers' educational level, differences were found in importance at home (8), existence at home (8), importance at school (6), and existence at school (7). Teachers' perspectives were similar to those of the students: the perceived importance of rights was higher than their perceived existence of rights, both at home and at school. Although the importance of rights is considered to be higher at home than at school, the teachers believed that the existence of rights is similar in both contexts.

In Portugal, there has been growing interest among researchers in this topic. Benavente, Mendes, and Schmidt (1997) studied citizenship rights, while Monteiro (1998) focused on the right to education. Veiga (2002, 2006) highlighted the importance of investigating student rights and carried out studies on students' perception of their rights at school and at home using the Children's Right Scale (Hart, Zneider, & Pavlovic, 1996; Veiga, 1999). This instrument allows the assessment of the existence and importance of rights at home and at school, using a Likert-type scale, including the following dimensions (Veiga, 2002): self-determination, instruction, recognition-esteem, socio-emotional relationship, protection-security, and basic provision.

Veiga (2002), analyzed Portuguese students' perceptions of their psychosocial rights, using a sample of 294 7<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> grade students of both sexes. The students who had less perception of existence of rights came from families with lower educational

level. There were no differences in terms of sex; 9<sup>th</sup> grade students showed more perception of the importance of rights and less perception of the existence of rights than 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders. Students who had experienced retention perceived themselves as having fewer rights, both at home (protection, instruction, and self-determination dimensions) and at school (esteem and relation dimensions). The students had less perception of existence of rights at school than in the family context. Students who had authoritative parents had less perception of existence of rights at school and at home; the same result was observed for students who came from families with low cohesion (protection and self-determination dimensions). The students who aspired to professional occupations that require fewer years of education believed they had fewer rights. Students from urban areas had a higher perception of rights in the dimensions provision and instruction, and those who "enjoyed watching aggressive television programs" had less perception of their rights.

Correlational analysis indicated that students with lower academic achievement had less perception of existence of rights at home and at school. There was a significant negative correlation between perceived rights and violent behavior at school, except for the dimension provision. Parental and teacher support were positively and significantly correlated with all dimensions of rights.

The literature suggests a relationship between students' rights and their intrinsic motivation and engagement in school (Covell, McNeil, & Howe, 2009). Covell and Howe (2001) claim the existence of a correlation between awareness of rights and self-esteem, which may be related to school variables such as attitudes towards school and students' engagement in school (Veiga, 1996; Veiga, Galvão, Festas, & Taveira, 2012; Woolfolk, 2014).

### **Family authority styles, parenting practices, and students' engagement in school**

The relationship between parental authority and children's social development and adaptation

has been investigated in some studies (Elder, 1963; Veiga, 2001). Elder (1963) analyzed students' perception of their parents' disciplinary style and described three different parenting styles: autocratic, democratic, and permissive. Baumrind (1971) defined parental styles as encompassing parenting values, attitudes, and behaviors and identified three different parenting styles: authoritative, permissive and responsive. In a longitudinal study carried out by Baumrind (1971), it was assumed that these parenting practices remained stable throughout a child's development.

Veiga (1988, 1993) described four parental authority styles, described as authoritative, understanding, permissive, and inconsistent. This author analyzed the relationships between the mother's disciplinary style (understanding versus authoritative), self-concept, and academic achievement in 217 students aged between 11 and 17. The author found statistically significant differences in self-concept, in favor of the students with understanding mothers. Children-parent interactions were related to academic self-concept and, to a lesser extent, to academic performance. In another study (Veiga, 1993), it was found that the students who perceived their father as understanding had a higher self-concept score on the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (PHSCS) than those who classified their fathers as authoritative.

A study by Abreu, Veiga, Antunes, and Ferreira (2006) investigated the correlations between academic and general self-concept and several family variables, such as family cohesion (with or without divorce or separation), family educational level (mother and father educational level), and siblings' relationship in 378 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders. Family educational level was analyzed based on the mean of the mother and father's educational levels resulting in two groups: low level (lower mean values for 9<sup>th</sup> graders) and middle/high level (equal or higher mean values for 9<sup>th</sup> graders). The analyses indicated that the students coming from adverse family contexts - poor parenting styles, low family educational level, troubled sibling relationship, access to violent media - showed low self-concept (behavior, anxiety, intellectual status,

popularity, physical appearance, satisfaction-happiness). Some parenting styles, particularly the understanding style, can be a factor of protection against the adolescents' behavioral problems (Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009; Simons-Morton & Haynie, 2002; Steinberg & Morris, 2001).

According to some teachers, parental demanding and controlling behaviors towards their children is associated with positive classroom behaviors including sociability, attention, and respect (De Bruyn, Dekovic, & Meijnen, 2003).

The relationship between students' engagement in school and parental practices was studied by Simons-Morton and Chen (2009) in a sample of 2,679 6<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> graders. An understanding parenting style influences student's engagement in school through the positive effect of parental expectations of school adjustment and by preventing the development of relationships with problematic peers. Suldo (2009) found that the parental understanding authority was related to the children's mastery goal orientation, which, in turn, is related to the use of self-regulatory strategies (Miller, Greene, Montalvo, Ravindran, & Nichols, 1996).

In summary, students with understanding parents of understanding parenting styles appear more engaged in school, show more positive school expectations, have better academic performance, and display fewer disruptive behaviors (Li, J. Lerner, & Lerner, 2010; Simons-Morton & Chen, 2009; Veiga, 2009).

## Discussion

The literature reviewed stresses the importance of family in students' engagement in school, emphasizing parental support for the accomplishment of positive academic results, such as school attendance and grades (N. Bowen & Bowen, 1998; Englund et al., 2004), and appropriate school behavior (Simon-Morton & Chen, 2009). Although family environment (including parental dispositions, expectations, support, and encouragement) plays an important role, it only partially explains the levels

of student engagement in school. There are other variables to consider, for instance, those related to school and its contexts (Woolfolk, 2014).

A number of studies show the importance of parents on their children's educational achievements (Eccles, 2005). Higher educational level reflects on parent-child communication, as well as on the use of more elaborate and sophisticated language, which, in turn, affects children's reading skills (Hoff, 2003). Parents with higher educational levels have higher expectations for their children education, which will be achieved with more years of schooling (Alexander, Entwisle, & Bedinger, 1994). Family income, related to parents' occupation, is reflected in the choice of the schools children attend, as well as in the area of residence; greater income favors opportunities and reduces risks (Furstenberg, Thomas, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). Some authors (Gohain, 2012; Hoff, 2003) believe that a lower sociocultural level is a risk factor for school dropout, while others, such as Byrnes (2003) or Kelly (2008), argue that there are other important variables to be considered, for example pre-existing reading and writing skills.

Several studies highlight the importance of students' rights and the need for their promotion (Covell & Howe, 2001; Covell et al., 2009). The relationship between students' engagement in school and students' rights is an issue that requires further research (Veiga et al., 2012).

Parental authority styles is one of the most commonly investigated family variables as predictors of adolescents' school outcomes (Elder, 1963; Veiga, 2001). Despite the increasing influence of peers during adolescence, parental authority still exerts substantial influence on children's academic achievement.

The literature review conducted underlines the importance of family in students' engagement in school and in their academic success. It also indicates the importance of considering school-related variables and different ethnic groups (e.g., Mandara & Murray, 2002) and contexts (Zhang & Anderson, 2010). The studies reviewed suggest that students with lack of parental support, with less perception of existence of rights, whose parents

have bad parenting skills, and who come from a low socioeconomic or low sociocultural context are more affected. These students show lower engagement in school and are more likely to drop out of school. Therefore, a psychosocial intervention is recommended in these cases. In addition, since student's school engagement can be a protective factor in preventing problematic school behavior patterns, it should be taken into consideration during the initial and continuing education of teachers and psychologists.

## Contributors

F. H. VEIGA and V. ROBU contributed to conception and design of this study, data analysis, interpretation, and discussion of the results; J. CONBOY, A. ORTIZ, C. CARVALHO, and D. GALVÃO contributed to the review and final approval of the manuscript.

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