Part III Commentary: Socio-Cultural Contexts, Social Competence, and Engagement at School

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Abstract

A highly regarded motivation researcher, Kathryn Wentzel, shared her perspectives in a commentary on the chapters in Part III. Wentzel explored questions relating to student competence including its definition, relation to engagement, and the role of support from important contexts (home, school, peers, and community) in fostering competence and engagement. The chapter concludes with directions for future research.

The social contexts and interactions that define children's lives can have a profound effect on their ability and willingness to engage in the academic life of schools. As illustrated clearly and convincingly in the chapters in this section of the *Handbook on Engagement*, interpersonal relationships, family and peer group dynamics, instruction-based social interactions, and indicators of competence all determine to some extent how and why students strive to achieve academic success. Beyond this recognition that learning is embedded in social contexts, however, how might a social-ecological approach help scholars and educators better understand children's engagement at school? One strategy is to bring to the forefront the notion that educational and intellectual endeavors are inherently social in nature and in doing so, consider more explicitly how and why advances in learning and cognitive development might reflect aspects of social competence.

In support of this approach are traditional developmental perspectives that recognize the interdependent relations of cognitive and social functioning in descriptions of intellectual development (e.g., Piaget, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978). More recently, scholars also have argued convincingly that the ability to excel at tasks designed to assess cognitive abilities is highly dependent on broad-level social influences that reflect cultural belief systems and practices (e.g., Greenfield, 1997), as well as intra-individual differences in social and emotional skills and self-regulation (e.g., Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). If scholars adopt this ecological perspective, however, questions arise as to what it means to be a socially competent student, how social competence supports various forms of intellectual engagement, and how competence development can be supported across multiple contexts of home, school, peer group, and community.

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In this commentary, I focus on three central issues that reflect these questions. The first concerns the notion that social competencies contribute to successful academic and learning-related outcomes. Implicit in this notion are fundamental questions concerning how to define social competence and understand it within the context of schooling. Second, issues surrounding the socially-valued goals and objectives that are relevant for understanding school adjustment are considered. Indeed, if social competence is an integral part of school success, how do we identify and examine the socially-valued goals that we would like students to achieve? Finally, processes of influence and theoretical issues related to social contexts and schooling are discussed. If sociocultural contexts are important for students' school-based competencies, how and why might this be so? I close with some general conclusions and provocations for future research in this area.

Defining Social Competence at School

In the social developmental literature, social competence has been described from a variety of perspectives ranging from the development of individual skills to more general adaptation within a particular setting. In these discussions, social competence frequently is associated with person-level outcomes such as effective behavioral repertoires, social problem-solving skills, positive beliefs about the self, achievement of social goals, and positive interpersonal relationships (see Rose-Krasnor, 1997). In addition, however, central to many definitions of social competence is the notion that social contexts play an integral role in providing opportunities for the development of these outcomes as well as in defining the appropriate parameters of children's social accomplishments (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1989). In this view, social competence reflects a more systemic phenomenon in which a balance is achieved between the accomplishment of positive outcomes for the individual and context-specific effectiveness.

Support for defining social competence as person-environment fit can be found in the work

of several theorists (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Ford, 1992). Bronfenbrenner (1989) argued that competence is a product of personal attributes such as goals, values, self-regulatory skills, and cognitive abilities, and of ways in which these attributes contribute to meeting situational requirements and demands. Bronfenbrenner further suggested that competence is facilitated by contextual supports that provide opportunities for the growth and development of these personal attributes, including communications concerning what is expected by the social group. Ford expanded on this notion by specifying dimensions of social competence that are framed within a model in which personal and context-specific goals are coordinated to address the needs of the individual as well as those of the social group.

The application of these ecologically-based models of social competence to the realm of schooling results in a multi-faceted description of children who are engaged in the social and academic life of their school. First, competent students are engaged in achieving goals that are personally valued as well as those that are valued by others. Second, the goals they pursue result in social integration as well as in positive developmental outcomes for the student. Socially-integrative outcomes are those which promote the smooth functioning of social groups at school (e.g., cooperative behavior) and are reflected most proximally in social acceptance and socially interdependent actions; student-related outcomes reflect healthy development of the self (e.g., perceived social competence, feelings of self-determination) and feelings of emotional well-being (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Ford, 1992).

The systemic nature of this approach highlights the fact that a student's school-based competencies are a product of social reciprocity between themselves, their teachers and their classmates. Just as students must behave in ways that meet the expectations of others, so must teachers and peers provide support for the achievement of a student's multiple goals. In this regard, the authors in this section reflect on the potential threats to children's social, emotional, and intellectual engagement when a balance

between the goals and needs of the student and those valued by others is not achieved. This can occur at the level of a students' broader cultural background and community (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012), within the peer group (Juvonen, Espinoza, & Knifsend, 2012), or when teachers and students do not achieve common purpose (Assor, 2012; Hipkins, 2012).

From this work, it is clear that a central tenet of an ecological approach to understanding student engagement is that achieving a balanced "fit" between the needs of the individual and those of the broader educational environment requires a focused consideration of the goals that children expect and are expected to achieve when they are at school. Assuming that socially competent students and responsive social systems contribute in meaningful ways to academic learning and achievement, an essential task is to identify the goals for education that we hold for students and consider their contribution to effective and sustainable engagement. This issue is discussed in the following section.

Social Goals and Objectives for Education

Surprisingly, research on educational goals is sparse. On the one hand, public schools were initially developed with an explicit function of educating children to become healthy, moral, and economically productive citizens; social outcomes in the form of moral character, conformity to social rules and norms, cooperation, and positive styles of social interaction have been promoted consistently by policy makers as goals for students to achieve (see Wentzel, 1991, for a review). On the other hand, researchers rarely have asked parents and teachers about their specific goals for students, although teachers often describe their "ideal" students with regard to outcomes in social (e.g., sharing, helping, and following rules), motivational (e.g., persistence, being intrinsically interested), and performance (e.g., earning high grades) domains (Wentzel, 2003). Similarly, the social and academic classroom goals that students themselves wish to

achieve and would like their classmates to achieve are not well-documented (cf., Dowson & McInerney, 2003).

Given this lack of empirical work on educational goals, several issues are especially relevant for future research on engagement. With respect to adults, perhaps the most important task for understanding the socio-cultural contexts of learning is to come to terms with the fundamental questions central to the education of children: As parents and educators, what are our educational goals for our children? As Nichols and Dawson (2012) suggest, do we want to teach simply to the test or nurture our children in ways that will help them become productive and healthy adults and citizens? By the same token, what are the goals that children bring with them to school and how can we accommodate these goals in educational settings? Do they strive to excel academically, to satisfy their curiosities, to establish relationships with others, or simply to feel safe? Finally, how can we support children's willingness to engage in academic pursuits and create learning environments in which all of these outcomes can be achieved?

In addressing the latter question, Raftery, Grolnick, and Flamm (2012) suggest that parental practices reflecting involvement, autonomy support, and structure can be instrumental in building a strong foundation for meeting students' goals that support engagement. Hipkins (2012) also highlights the importance of identifying curricular goals that afford students the opportunity to relate learning to their personal lives and interests. Assor (2012) discusses similar classroom practices that support the internalization of personal goals while also providing opportunities for students to achieve more fundamental needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Practices that promote effective goal pursuit, that are common across socialization contexts as well as unique to particular settings, clearly deserve systematic exploration and further clarification.

In addition, the role of peers in helping students define social competence for themselves and each other should not be ignored when trying to address these questions. As Juvonen et al. (2012)

illustrate, a consideration of self-enhancing as well as socially-integrative outcomes as dual components of social competence is especially important because the achievement of personal goals and social acceptance are not always compatible. Indeed, the process of achieving optimal levels of engagement will always include negotiations, compromise, and coordination of the multiple and often conflicting goals of teachers, peers, students themselves, and their parents. It is imperative that we identify ways to help students coordinate these often antagonistic goals to achieve a healthy balance of multiple objectives.

Finally, just as we need to specify further the socially valued goals we would like students to achieve, it is important that definitions of engagement also reflect these socially-derived outcomes more explicitly. For example, behavioral engagement is routinely defined as behavior specific to learning tasks such as effort and persistence (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Skinner, Kindermann, Connell, & Wellborn, 2009). In contrast, Pianta, Hamre, and Allen (2012) offer a more systemic approach, defining behavioral engagement as a process, embedded in relationships and social interactions (see also Hipkins, 2012). This more inclusive approach to behavioral engagement is especially valuable given that being successful at school requires children to perform a range of social as well as academic competencies.

In fact, displays of prosocial (e.g., helping and sharing) and socially responsible (e.g., following rules) behavior are essential for developing positive relationships with teachers and peers, and have been associated positively and consistently to a range of academically-related outcomes, including motivation and academic performance (see Wentzel, 1999, 2005, 2009 for reviews). Similarly, establishing and maintaining healthy relationships with teachers and peers has been related positively to a range of academic outcomes, including motivation and engagement (Wentzel, 1999, 2005, 2009). Therefore, if efforts to develop and maintain interpersonal relationships and to display positive forms of social behavior are important for understanding school success, defining desirable forms of engagement

to include more behavioral and process-oriented activities can only enhance our understanding of school-based competence.

Processes of Influence

In addition to issues concerning the nature of social competence and what it is that we would like students to engage in at school, the authors in this section remind us that it also is necessary to understand how and why social and contextual supports can facilitate active engagement. In this regard, many authors reflect on the ongoing social interactions that children have with parents, teachers, and peers, with a specific focus on the opportunities and resources that these relationships provide to support or hinder academic engagement (see chapters by Raftery et al.; Juvonen et al.; & Pianta et al.). These discussions, however, also highlight the need for more precise understanding of the nature of interpersonal relationships and the mechanisms whereby the supports they provide have influence on students' engagement at school. More specifically, they call into question what it is that we mean when we refer to a relationship, and what it is about a relationship that promotes positive engagement in children.

Defining Interpersonal Relationships

Relationships are typically defined as enduring connections between two individuals, uniquely characterized by degrees of continuity, shared history, and interdependent interactions across settings and activities (Collins & Repinski, 1994; Hinde, 1997). Definitions also are frequently extended to include the qualities of a relationship, as evidenced by levels of trust, intimacy, and sharing; the presence of positive affect, closeness, and affective tone; and the content and quality of communication (Collins & Repinski, 1994; Laible & Thompson, 2007). Along each of these dimensions, relationships can evoke positive as well as negative experiences (see also, Juvonen et al., 2012).

In addition, relationships are often thought of in terms of their influence and what they provide the individual. From a developmental perspective, relationships are believed to be experienced through the lens of mental representations developed over time and with respect to specific experiences (Bowlby, 1969; Laible & Thompson, 2007). Early representations of relationships with caregivers are believed to provide the foundation for developing relationships outside the family context, with the quality of parent-child relationships (i.e., levels of warmth and security) often predicting the quality of peer and teacher relationships in early and middle childhood (see Wentzel & Looney, 2007). Mental representations that associate relationships with a personal sense of power and agency, predictability and safety, useful resources, and reciprocity are believed to be optimal for the internalization of social influence (see Kuczynski & Parkin, 2007; Raftery et al., 2012). Researchers also have focused on the additional benefits of relationships, such as emotional well-being, a sense of cohesion and connectedness, instrumental help, knowledge of what is expected, and a sense of identity for promoting positive developmental outcomes (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989).

Of relevance for the current discussion is that research on students' relationships with others rarely captures the conceptually rich nature of these definitions or the developmental implications of their influence. Expanding models and assessment strategies to include these multiple aspects of interpersonal relationships would undoubtedly enhance our understanding of how they support engagement at school. A description and discussion of illustrative models follows in the next section.

Elaborating on Models of Influence

Similar to socialization perspectives, the models used to guide research on the influence of interpersonal relationships on engagement described in this section propose causal pathways by which the affective quality of relationships (e.g., those that are emotionally close and secure), have influence primarily by promoting a positive sense of self and emotional well-being, and motivation to engage with the environment (see chapters by Bempechat & Shernoff; Juvonen et al.; Lam, Wong, Yang, & Liu, 2012).

An additional strategy has been to consider relationships as serving a broader range of functions that contribute to students' competence at school (see chapters by Pianta et al.; Raftery et al.; see also, Wentzel, 2004, 2005; Wentzel, Russell, Garza, & Merchant, 2011). Although the affective tone of interpersonal interactions is a central focus of these models, additional dimensions of relationships that reflect levels of predictability and structure, instrumental resources, and concern with a student's emotional and physical well-being also are considered. In line with ecological perspectives on competence development, Wentzel's model (2004) described how teacher-student and peer interactions along these dimensions can promote student motivation and academic performance. The utility of this model for guiding work on engagement lies in a differentiated definition of social support and a more complete picture of how perceived supports might influence academic engagement and learning in the classroom.

As depicted in Fig. 23.1, Wentzel's model predicts that multiple social supports promote positive engagement in the social and academic life of the classroom in part, by influencing the psychological and emotional functioning of students. Specifically, Wentzel suggested that students will come to value and subsequently pursue academic and social goals valued by teachers and peers when they perceive their interactions and relationships with them as providing clear direction concerning goals that should be achieved; as facilitating the achievement of their goals by providing help, advice, and instruction; as being safe and responsive to their goal strivings; and as being emotionally supportive and nurturing. These dimensions reflect essential components of social support discussed in this volume, in that: (1) information is provided concerning what is expected and valued in the classroom (Bempechat & Shernoff; Nichols & Dawson; Raftery et al.); (2) attempts to achieve these valued outcomes are
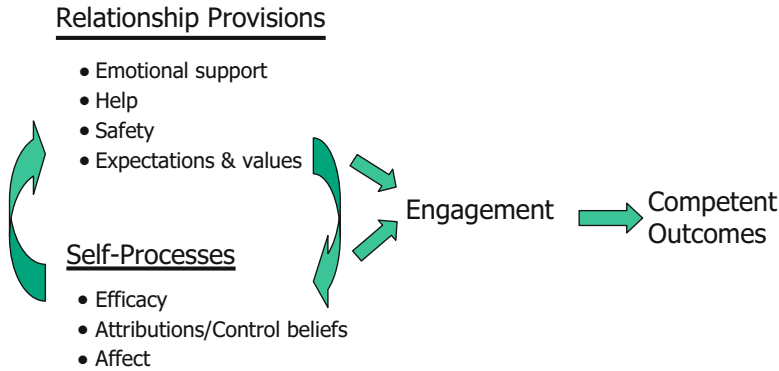
Fig. 23.1 A Model of Social Supports and Classroom Competence

met with help and instruction (Assor; Bempechat & Shernoff; Pianta et al.; Raftery et al.); (3) attempts to achieve outcomes can be made in a safe, non-threatening environment (Juvonen et al.); and (4) individuals are made to feel like a valued member of the group (Bempechat & Shernoff; Juvonen et al.; Pianta et al.).

As a set of interacting processes, these dimensions create a climate within which specific instructional practices and academic content are delivered. Moreover, the degree to which these practices and content result in tangible learning outcomes depends on the quality of the relationship climate (see Darling & Steinberg, 1993). In other words, the affective quality of these educational climates will determine the effectiveness of other contextual supports such as communication of expectations and instrumental help in promoting engagement. With regard to classrooms, therefore, engagement in socially-valued activities, including academic pursuits, will be more likely to occur if students believe that others care about them and want them to engage (e.g., Wentzel, Baker, & Russell, 2012; Wentzel, Russell, Garza, & Merchant, 2012).

The model shown in Fig. 23.1 suggests that these various aspects of social support can promote classroom engagement indirectly by having an impact on students' beliefs about themselves. Several belief systems are likely to be critical in this regard, including self-perceptions of academic efficacy (Bandura, 1986), perceived control and autonomy (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000), and affect associated with academic pursuits (e.g., negative

arousal or anxiety or a positive sense of well-being) (Meece, Wigfield, & Eccles, 1990; Pekrun, 2009). Each of these self-perceptions are central to theories of motivation and engagement and are consistent predictors of student goals, values, interests, and positive forms of classroom behavior (see, Wentzel & Wigfield, 2009).

Finally, this model predicts that social supports and self-perceptions are related to academic outcomes by way of classroom engagement in social and academic outcomes that are central to the learning process. These outcomes can take many forms, including the active pursuit of socially valued goals such as to behave appropriately and to learn, effort and persistence at academic tasks, displays of appropriate classroom behavior, and focused attention on learning and understanding subject matter (e.g., Wentzel, 1994, 1997, 1998, 2002). Students' pursuit of academic and social goals that are personally as well as socially valued should then serve as a mediator between opportunities afforded by positive interactions with teachers and peers, and their academic and social accomplishments.

Wentzel's model provides an example of a more complex set of processes that link process model of interpersonal relationships to engagement that can move the field forward. In addition, however, greater focus on broader-level context supports also is needed. For example, within the context of schools, structural features such as school and class size, teacher:student ratios, and funding can influence the amount and quality of social and instructional resources and

opportunities available to students. Similarly, additional research on classroom reward structures (Nichols & Dawson, 2012; Slavin, 2012), organizational culture and climate (Roeser, Urdan, & Stephens, 2009), and person-environment fit (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Eccles & Midgley, 1989) also might inform our understanding of how the social institutions and contexts within which learning takes place can motivate children to engage in learning activities and positive forms of social interaction.

Finally, work that clearly delineates the processes and mechanisms whereby contexts and relationships can be improved warrants careful attention. To illustrate, work in the area of peer relationships has provided evidence that teachers' beliefs and behaviors, classroom organization, and school-wide structure, composition, and climate affects students' choice of friends, their general propensity to make friends, and levels of peer acceptance and friendship networks in classrooms (Juvonen et al., 2012; Pianta et al., 2012; see also, Wentzel, Baker, & Russell, 2009). Similar work on teacher-student relationships has been less frequent although professional development efforts to improve teachers' classroom management strategies (Evertson & Weinstein, 2006), disciplinary strategies (Developmental Studies Center), and interpersonal interactions and relationships with students (Pianta, 2006; Pianta et al., 2012) have shown promise. Finally, in this volume, chapters by Bempechat and Shernoff (2012), Raftery et al. 2012, highlight ways in which families and schools can build stronger and more interdependent connections. These are excellent examples of work that is challenging but necessary to move the field forward.

Final Provocations for the Field

The nested quality of socio-cultural contexts described by the authors in this section provides interesting and provocative challenges for future research. Many of these challenges have already been noted, However, several remaining issues deserve comment. First, as noted by many of the authors in this volume, models of school-based engagement and competence also need to account for a diversity of student backgrounds and experiences (e.g., chapters by Bempechat & Shernoff; Raftery et al.). Indeed, much of what we know about these processes comes from studies of White, middle-class children. In addition to the research described herein, other researchers have found that supportive relationships with teachers might benefit minority students and girls in achieving positive behavioral and academic outcomes to a greater extent than Caucasian students and boys (e.g., Crosnoe & Needham, 2004). Studies of adolescent peer groups have documented that some African-American youth might face disproportionate levels of conflict between parental and peer values, with the potential to have a negative impact on academic achievement (Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbusch, 1996). Hispanic adolescents are more likely than their non-Hispanic peers to be highly connected to parents and family members, with levels of family interdependence and closeness being related positively to healthy academic and social functioning (e.g., Phinney, Kim-Jo, Osorio, & Vilhjalmsdottir, 2005).

Along these lines, the moderating effects of broader contextual factors requires further study. For instance, in response to findings reported by the NICHD Child Care Study, researchers have argued that when childcare variables are assessed in more diverse samples that include a broader range of SES and ethnicity, different results are obtained (e.g., Sagi, Koren-Karie, Gini, Ziv, & Joels, 2002). Researchers of older children also have found that race moderates relations between dropping out of school and features of their schools and families, such that the SES of families and schools predicts dropping out for White and Hispanic adolescents but not for African-American students (Rumberger, 1995). Some studies also have demonstrated differential teacher treatment of students as a function of student gender, race (Irvine, 1986), and behavioral styles (Chang, 2003), with these differences sometimes attributed in part, to teachers' own race and gender (Saft & Pianta, 2001). Expanding research to incorporate the experiences of all students would provide valuable information about the generalizability of extant theories and

empirical findings, and provide practitioners with needed guidance for working with diverse populations of students.

In addition to studying ways in which families, communities, and cultures can support student engagement, additional research on ways in which schools can have effects on children by way of their positive impact on the economic and political life of communities also is warranted (e.g., Sederberg, 1987; Reynolds, 1995). School-to-work and service learning programs provide excellent examples of school-based resources that have the potential to provide positive benefits to communities and families by engaging adults and children in activities outside of the classroom. The notion that community and family effects might mediate the impact of schools on children is intriguing, but rarely studied in systematic fashion. Therefore, a necessary next step is the development of conceptual models that consider ways in which children and the various social systems in which they develop, including home, peer groups, communities, and schools, interact to support the development of school-related competence. How the coordination of these systems changes as children develop and ways in which they jointly contribute to children's developing school-related goals should be a primary target of researchers' efforts.

Finally, identifying ways in which social contexts promote the development of social and academic competencies at school requires systematic experimental research over time. However, experimental studies designed to examine processes that support social competence development in schools are rare. Moreover, most school reform efforts focus on improving achievement test scores and other academic outcomes (e.g., No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), without consideration of the social and psychological consequences of these efforts. Given the strong inter-relations among school success, qualities of relationships with teachers and peers, classroom climate, and school cultures, it seems essential that reform initiatives involving experimentation in schools and evaluation of student progress incorporate assessments of processes and outcomes informed by a broader socio-cultural perspective.

In closing, the authors of chapters in this section are to be applauded for their extremely rich and insightful work on socio-cultural contexts and student engagement. The goal of this commentary has been to provide some additional thoughts and insights into the nature of school-related competence and how it might be supported by students' experiences within broader socio-cultural contexts, including relationships with their parents, teachers and peers, social aspects of learning structures, and the value and belief systems that define school cultures and the communities they live in. In conjunction with the other chapters in this volume, my hope is to provide a strong foundation to explore further the role of social experiences and contexts in supporting the social and intellectual accomplishments of all children.

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