European Journal of Education Studies
ISSN: 2501 - 1111
ISSN-L: 2501 - 1111
Available on-line at: www.oapub.org/edu

doi: 10.5281/zenodo.3603513 Volume 6 | Issue 10 | 2020

AN INVESTIGATION ON PREDICTORS OF STUDENT ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

Souksakhone Sengsouliya[i], **Sithane Soukhavong,** **Nieo Silavong,** **Souk Sengsouliya,** **Farrah Littlepage**
Faculty of Education,
National University of Laos,
Lao PDR

Abstract:
This study investigates: 1) senior high school students' academic engagement; 2) factors predicting their academic engagement. The sample for this study included senior high school students from two different contexts: Vientiane capital and Luangprabang. A purposive sampling technique was used. The study employed a convergent parallel design. Both quantitative and qualitative were collected simultaneously through questionnaires, interviews, and observations. This study analyzed for percentage, mean, and standard deviation, and conducted a content analysis. The results showed that most of the students hold a high level of engagement in all three dimensions (emotional, behavioral, and cognitive). The behavioral and emotional dimensions had the highest engagement scores ($\overline{X} = 3.45$; $\overline{X} = 3.42$), showing that the students in the sample are likely to be engaged in learning behaviorally and emotionally. Furthermore, the study found that teacher and peer interaction are the most powerful factors predicting their academic engagement. Most of the students consider the kindness and friendliness of teachers to be important for their engagement. Moreover, the students in the sample also indicate that they are more engaged in learning if teachers provide opportunities to have discussions with peers. To implement a good teaching and learning environment in high school levels, and especially to promote senior high school students' learning engagement, administrators should consider creating a close follow-up plan on teacher professional development activities, which could help ensure the quality of teaching in schools. In addition, it is recommended that school leaders integrate more extra-curricular activities, as well as more opportunities for parent/guardian participation.

Keywords: influential factors, academic engagement, high school students

[i] Correspondence: email noysouksslly@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

Academic engagement is measured by students' commitment and investment in learning through curricular and extracurricular school activities (Ahlfeldt, Mehta, & Sellnow, 2005; Alrashidi, Phan, & Ngu, 2016; Hart, Steward, & Jimerson, 2011). It refers to how much attention students pay to learning activities such as coming to class, submitting assignments, and listening to teachers' instructions (Hu & Ching, 2012). Academic engagement levels serve as a strong predictor of student learning and personal development (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2004; Murray, et al., 2004). An evaluation of students' academic engagement is necessary for teachers as it can assist in resolving students' learning difficulties (Olson & Peterson, 2015).

According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris (2004), a student's continuous engagement in learning serves as a factor predicting learning achievement at all levels. That means it is required to improve students' learning engagement at different levels. In Lao PDR, a barrier to educational development is the high drop-out rate of high school students, which is caused by poor learning and students' demotivation (MoES, 2018). Sengsouliya and his colleagues (2015) pointed out that low motivation and engagement matters as it creates many challenges for teachers.

According to Jennings and Angelo (2006), attention levels and academic engagement varies and is changeable, so educators or teachers need to adapt their teaching methods to be consistent with the reality of students. Several recent related researches on student engagement have relied on a single instrument only, lacking of the assessment of multi-dimensions of engagement (Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards, & Zyngier, 2004). Accordingly, it is recommended that an evaluation of academic engagement should be conducted using different instruments (Fredricks et al., 2012).

2. Purposes of the Research

- To investigate the characteristics of academic engagement in 12th grade students
- To determine factors predicting their academic engagement

3. Conceptual Framework

This study employs the concept of academic engagement proposed by Fredericks et al. (2004) and by Murray et al. (2004), focusing on three types of engagement: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement.

According to a wide review of empirical studies (DeVito, 2016; Kraft & Dougherty, 2013; Wang & Eccles, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2010; etc), the main influential factors are personal motivation, peers, teachers, school, and family.

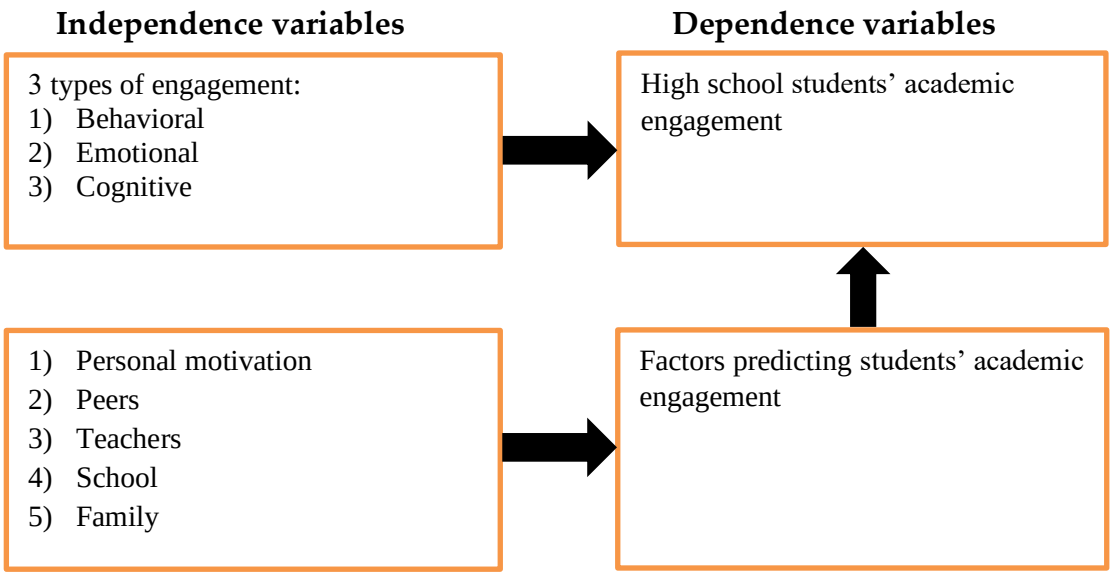

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Research
(Source: Authors)

4. Literature Review

4.1 Definitions of Academic Engagement

According to Conner (2011), academic engagement is a similar term to words such as activeness, participation, interest, motivation, and effort. For DeVito (2016), engagement refers to commitment to an activity; it is the relationship between people and activities. Another view states that academic engagement is related to students' perceived value of the learning process, displayed through activities such as coming to classes, preparing for school, submitting homework, and taking part in school activities (Willms, 2003). Moreover, several scholars (Ahlfeldt et al., 2005; Alrashidi et al., 2016; Hart et al., 2011) also agree that academic engagement can be measured by student commitment, investment, and attitudes toward school and school activities. Additionally, Coates (2006) mentions that academic engagement relates to factors that are necessary for learning. That means academic engagement happens if students have positive attitudes toward learning activities, and they have good communication with teachers. A study on teachers' understanding on learning engagement, conducted by Garette (2011), shows that the term "engagement" is comprised of active participations in learning process, such as the ability to understand lessons, being attentive to learning, involving in cooperative learning, having eye communication-thinking-questioning, having idea exchange, being curious to know, seeking-interaction-analysis, as well as making time-efforts. Similarly, Martin and Torres (2016) explain that academic engagement is associated with learner's interactions with different educational components, such as community, school staff, classmates, teachers, and curriculum.

4.2 Indicators of Academic Engagement

Garette (2011) explains how a student expresses his/her learning engagement. It is likely observed in behaviors such as participation in discussion with classmates, participation in class activities, asking questions, making comments, debating, and discussing on a particular learning problem, both inside and outside of classroom with classmates and teachers, as well as submitting assignments. Martin and Torres (2016) support this perspective and mention that academic engagement by students is related to the relationship between students and different domains, such as community, school staff, classmates or peers, teaching, and curriculum.

Martin and Torres further explain that engagement can be expressed in three different domains: 1) the behavioral domain—participation in learning activities, socializing, and reacting to curriculum; 2) the emotional domain— relationships with classmates, teachers, and school; 3) the cognitive domain—the level of engagement or commitment to learning. Several researchers (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards, & Zyngier, 2004) have proposed that students' academic engagement can be measured through three dimensions of engagement. In the behavioral dimension, students show their engagement through participation. This dimension can be visible to teachers when evaluating assignments, and observing tasks (Fredericks, et al., 2004). Emotionally, students express their negative and positive feelings towards teachers, peers, subject, and school (Fredericks, et al., 2004). Cognitively, students invest personal time and effort in learning and they actively commit themselves to having a deep understanding of a particular subject (Fredericks, et al., 2004). Murray and colleagues (2004) describe different characteristics of students' disengagement in learning. For instance, not being attentive to while learning, not submitting homework, displaying annoying behaviors or acts in classroom, being absent to class, skipping class, and showing reluctance to come to school. On the other hand, Zepke, Leach, and Butler (2010) explain that students who are engaged in learning, are likely to have freedom in learning, have close relationships with other classmates, have self-efficacy, desire achievement, and have constructive interactions with teachers.

Table 1: Concepts of academic engagement

Behavioral	Engagement is understood in terms of participation. It is evident through actions that may lead to certain visible outcomes, e.g. completing tasks, acquiring skills.
Affective	Engagement is understood in terms of commitment, where schooling engages individuals' emotions, values and beliefs (such as enthusiasm, optimism and confidence) that inform their actions.
Cognitive	Engagement is understood in terms of investment, where tasks engage individuals' thought processes and intellect (such as analysis, synthesis and persistence) in ways that may have meaning and hold interest.

Source: Murray et al. (2004p. 4)

In addition, there have been several scholars (Conner, 2011; DeVito, 2016; Hattie & Anderman, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Veiga et al., 2014) who utilized the above-mentioned concept in determining students' academic engagement.

4.3 Factors predicting Academic Engagement

Taylor and Parsons (2011) propose 5 elements that strongly contribute to students' learning engagement and learning achievement: 1) learning should be relevant to the learners' reality and their community needs; 2) the learning environment should include modern technology, not limited to computers only, for instance scientific learning aids, a variety of learning sources, and portable technology devices and should not be limited to computers; 3) learning atmosphere should be open, challenging, creative, and focused on making learners responsible for self-regulated learning, for self-evaluation of their own learning, and for setting learning goals; 4) cooperation and communication among classmates and teachers through planning, seeking, creating, and exchanging ideas is very important; 5) schools should also develop a positive learning culture for students, especially by encouraging teachers to become learners too. School should consider designing learning activities to focus on learning engagement as the first priority and achievement as the second priority (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). When grouping and analyzing perspectives towards factors associated with academic or learning engagement from different studies and in different contexts, it is found that the influential factors relate to sub-elements such as personal motivation, peers, teachers, school, and family, which are discussed in the following paragraph.

4.3.1 Personal Motivation

According to a wide range of literature on influential factors associated with learning engagement, one significant factor is personal motivation (Alrashidi et al., 2016; Groves, Sellars, Smith, & Barber, 2015; Witkowski & Cornell, 2015; Zepke et al., 2010). Zepke and colleagues (2010) believe that internal motivation serves as a self-determinant of completing tasks or achieving a goal. In addition, it is presumed that students with more internal motivation are more likely to continuously engage in learning (Zepke et al., 2010). Groves, Sellars, Smith, and Barber (2015) put forth a similar view, saying that if students can learn independently and have self-efficacy in learning, they are likely to be motivated to learn. Consistently, Alrashidi and colleagues (2016) mention that developing students' personal motivation and communicative skills is very crucial, in a way that they become active and attentively participate in all learning activities.

4.3.2 Peers

Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer (2014) offer the view that learning in groups can enhance a positive learning atmosphere, and that group learning also supports students in independent learning. For instance, when students are given time to discuss, interact, encourage, learn together, and respect to each other with peers, they feel safe as they have friends who understand and care about them (Furrer et al., 2014). Consistently, a study conducted by Witkowski and Cornell (2015) revealed that cooperative learning activities help students comprehend knowledge better and also they provide encouragement and engagement in learning. Moreover, other scholars also support the trend that peers positively correlate with learning (Murray et al., 2004; Sengsouliya et al., 2015). Additionally, Guay, Boivin, and Hodges (1999) also agree that studying with peers is

effective for gaining knowledge as learners have freedom in learning which is something different the freedom they get from teachers (as cited in Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer, 2014). Zepke and colleagues agree with such a view, conducting student group work can facilitate student learning and this activity can make students feel that they are part of the group (Zepke & Leach, 2010).

4.3.3 Teachers

Teacher is claimed as another key factor associated with students' learning engagement, especially the relationship between teacher and students is very supportive. It motivates students into acquiring and creates positive learning atmosphere (Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer, 2014; Groves, Sellars, Smith, & Barber, 2015; Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards, & Zyngier, 2004; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Teacher who knows how to give encouragement and/or help solve problems to students, it is clearly seen that students tend to feel warm and engaged more with teacher and school (Furrer, Skinner, & Pitzer, 2014). Accordingly, it is believed by more researchers (Guvenc, 2015; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012), that when students feel that their teacher cares and sincerely expects for them to learn they will be happy, pleased, and have fun in learning as well as other learning activities without pressure. For Veiga and colleagues (2014), teachers' teaching performances such as giving praise, providing freedom to learn, and grouping learners for tasks, students are more engaged in learning. Similarly, Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards, and Zyngier (2004) mentioned that if teacher considers having good care and being kind or showing good friendship with students, they are more committed to learning, Murray and colleagues also view that the relationship between teacher and students can be developed through training or given instructions to teachers.

Reyes and colleagues (2012) mention that student-teacher interaction is crucial as it positively correlates with students' learning engagement, as it can be visible through emotional domain. Similarly, Trowler (2010) agrees that teacher behaviors can influence students negatively or positively. In this sense, the term "negative or positive" is not about learning outcomes, but it is more about students' attitudes towards learning. Basically, engagement happens through collaborations between the teacher and students. That means both the teacher and students need to commit and put efforts to make an active classroom (Garrette, 2011). However, improving student engagement is not an easy task; it is very challenging for teachers and school to find out how to engage learners (Groves, Sellars, Smith, & Barber, 2015).

4.3.4 School

According to the literature, school has a strong association with students' learning (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012; Russell & Slater, 2011; Willms, 2003). It is required for schools to get to know the characteristics or true experiences of learners in order to design and plan on how to make students feel in control, independent in learning, and make them know about their passion and own strengths in learning (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). One of things, it is important that school administrators should consider accepting and respecting the diversity of learners, while aiming to enhance learners' knowledge,

skills, and abilities related to both social and cultural dimensions (Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2010). In addition, Taylor and Parsons (2011) recommend that it is also needed for school to encourage teachers to learn from students as well. Taylor and Parsons further claim that designing learning tasks and activities must consider learner engagement as the first priority, the learning achievement as the second priority instead. Consistently, Russell and Slater (2011) agree with this perspective, supporting that if school can provide facilities such as good library, quality learning system, educational mentors, and educational skill training, and other supporting programs, students tend to have more positive attitudes and activeness in learning. Another thing is that students' learning engagement relates to having stricter and clearer rules and regulations, and having high standard criteria (Murray et al., 2004; Willms, 2003). Furthermore, school administrators should also consider continuous improvements of curriculum and learning activities. According to Claxton (2007), engaging students is concerned with developing relevancies in curriculum and school activities (as cited in Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Students need to be taught of what they are interested in and of what they can use for solving problems in their real lives, even more students should also learn and monitor their learning at the same time (Taylor & Parsons, 2011).

4.3.5 Family

According to Murray, Mitchell, Edwards, and Zyngier (2004), family serves as another determinant of learners' learning engagement. As Murray and colleagues further explain and demonstrate some characteristics of family that hinder learners from learning: extensive family, having problems in family, parent divorcement, migration, parent health problems, parent economic status, parents with low educational background, as well as not living with parents. Accordingly, Willms (2003) put that students from low economic status, from a single parent, including who are born abroad tend to associate with negative learning achievement. Similarly, Zepke and colleagues (2010) also agree and further view that student learning can be developed through enhancing parent support and regular follow-up, so family members should commit themselves in encouraging and promoting all learning related activities.

5. Research Methodology

This research is a case study. The present authors have a specific interest in the case, finding of academic or learning engagement of the final year student in high school. The study aims at investigating what predicts learning engagement among top class students. The data collection is made of collecting quantitative and qualitative data.

5.1 Participants

Two top classes of senior high school students from two different cases were targeted. There were 71 student participants (41 female). This sample was purposively selected, targeting on students with good learning achievement, and from top classes. As DeVito (2016) mention students with good academic background and learning achievement can

prove their learning engagement, so the present authors support the idea that investigating factors predicting learning engagement is best conducted with top students.

5.2 Data Collection and Interpretation

Questionnaire, interview, and observation were used as instruments for collecting data. The data obtained was analyzed for means, standard deviation, percentage, and frequency. In reporting the results, the modified scale of Appleton et al. (2006) was applied, the higher means the more engagement participants have towards their learning: 3.50 – 4.00 = Very high level of engagement; 2.50 – 3.49 = High level of engagement; 1.50 – 2.49 = Low level of engagement; and 1.00 – 1.49 = Very low level of engagement. For interpreting the factors predicting learning engagement, the rating scale of importance, proposed by Zepke et al. (2010) was used. 1.0 – 1.9 (Least importance); 2.0 – 2.9 (Some importance); and 3.0 – 3.9 (High importance). For the qualitative data from interviews and observations were processed for content analysis.

6. Findings

6.1 Participants and Their Academic Engagement

In the total number of 71 participants, mostly female, that accounts for 57.7%. Most participants are at age of 18 or older (73.2%). Most of them are Laoloum ethnic group (60.6%), and most of them live with parents, representing 42.3%.

Participants' academic engagement: the engagement in this research is focused on three different types of engagement such as emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement. The mean scores are as indicated in the following table.

Table 2: Participants' Academic Engagement across three dimensions

Items	$\overline{X}$	S.D.	Interpretation
1. Cognitive engagement	3.16	.412	High
2. Emotional engagement	3.42	.605	High
3. Behavioral engagement	3.45	.625	High

From the table above, the result shows that participants express their engagement in learning at a high level in all three dimensions. At a closer glance, it is found that the participants score lowest towards Cognitive engagement ($\overline{X}$ = 3.16), and score higher towards Emotional and Behavioral engagements, as shown in the figure 2 below.

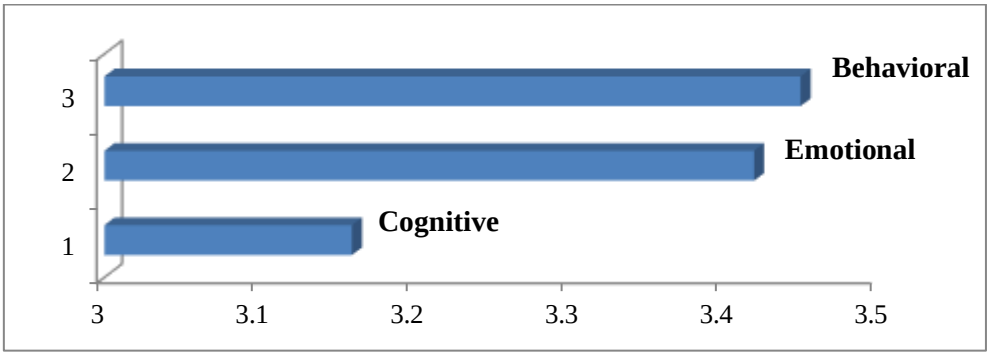

Figure 2: Levels of engagement across three dimensions

When exploring the detailed items of all three types of engagement, it can be explained that Behavioral dimension is found to be the engagement with the highest mean score of all. What is exposed includes that participants take notes while in class ($\overline{X}$ = 3.49/SD= .582); participants take parts in group work or do tasks assigned with classmates ($\overline{X}$ = 3.66/SD= .533); including coming to class in time ($\overline{X}$ = 3.80/SD= .400). For the emotional dimension, it is found to be the engagement type with second highest score. In this regard, participants feel that they want to come to school everyday ($\overline{X}$ = 3.53/SD= .672); they express the feeling of learning new things from the class ($\overline{X}$ = 3.54/SD= .580); and they feel proud to have an opportunity for learning ($\overline{X}$ = 3.92/SD= .257).

6.2 Factors Predicting Students' Academic Engagement

The analysis results of factors predicting students' academic engagement are detailed as follows:

A. Personal motivation

It is shown that Personal motivation was found as some importance, scoring at ($\overline{X}$ = 2.99/SD= .390). After inspecting, three items are found to have some importance: being able to answer questions to teachers ($\overline{X}$ = 2.70/SD= .834), having pressure in classroom ($\overline{X}$ = 2.76/SD= .836); knowing where to ask for advice concerning learning ($\overline{X}$ = 2.80/SD= .785). The other two items are found to have high importance: being able to understand teachers' instructions ($\overline{X}$ = 3.05/SD= .606); and having goals for learning ($\overline{X}$ = 3.63/SD= .513).

Table 3. Personal motivation

Items	$\overline{X}$	S.D	Interpretation
1. Having goals for learning	3.63	.513	High importance
2. Being able to understand teachers' instructions	3.05	.606	High importance
3. Being able to answer questions to teachers	2.70	.834	Some importance
4. Having pressure in classroom	2.76	.836	Some importance
5. Knowing where to ask for advice about learning	2.80	.785	Some importance
Average	**2.99**	**.390**	**Some importance**

B. Peer

According to the result (Table 4), it can be seen that Peer is considered to have high importance, scoring at ($\overline{X}$ = 3.41/SD= .417). Looking at closer, all four items are found to have high mean scores between ($\overline{X}$ =3.15–3.66): learning and discussing with classmates/peers ($\overline{X}$ = 3.66/SD= .533); understanding lessons more clearly when classmates help explain ($\overline{X}$ = 3.46/SD= .628); classmates' positive words and praises ($\overline{X}$ = 3.39/SD= .686); and having fun with classmates in learning ($\overline{X}$ = 3.15/SD= .872).

Table 4: Peer

Items	$\overline{X}$	**S.D**	**Interpretation**
1. Learning and discussing with classmates/peers	3.66	.533	High importance
2. Understanding lessons more clearly when classmates help explain	3.46	.628	High importance
3. Classmates' positive words and praises	3.39	.686	High importance
4. Having fun with classmates in learning	3.15	.872	High importance
Average	**3.41**	**.417**	**High importance**

C. Teacher factor

The Teacher factor was found to have high importance to students' learning engagement, scoring at ($\overline{X}$ = 3.46/SD= .329). When looking at the items, all five items have high mean scores between ($\overline{X}$ = 3.28 – 3.60): Teacher' attention and caring on student learning ($\overline{X}$ = 3.66/SD= .597); Teacher comments or feedbacks ($\overline{X}$ = 3.28/SD= .720); Teacher's teaching methods ($\overline{X}$ = 3.28/SD= .613); Teacher's encouragement and communication ($\overline{X}$ = 3.49/SD= .582); and kind, friendly teacher ($\overline{X}$ = 3.60/SD= .597).

Table 5: Teacher

Items	$\overline{X}$	S.D	Interpretation
1. Kind, friendly teacher	3.60	.597	High importance
2. Teacher' attention and caring on student learning	3.66	.533	High importance
3. Teacher's teaching methods	3.28	.613	High importance
4. Teacher's encouragement and communication	3.49	.582	High importance
5. Teacher comments/feedbacks	3.28	.720	High importance
Average	**3.46**	**.329**	**High importance**

D. School factor

The school is another factor that was found to have high importance on student academic engagement, scoring at ($\overline{X}$ = 3.11/SD= .501). When looking at closer, two items are found to have some importance: school library ($\overline{X}$ = 2.85/SD= .960); school activities that call for parent participation ($\overline{X}$ = 2.88/SD= .747). The other four items are found to have high importance: facilities for learning ($\overline{X}$ = 3.09/SD= .777); staff reaction and communication ($\overline{X}$ = 3.16/SD= .736); activities provided by school ($\overline{X}$ = 3.16/SD= .609); and strict rules of the school ($\overline{X}$ = 3.49/SD= .651).

Table 6. School factor

Items	$\overline{X}$	S.D	Interpretation
1. Extra-curriculum activities provided by school	3.16	.609	High importance
2. School activities that call for parent participation	2.88	.747	Some importance
3. Facilities for learning	3.09	.777	High importance
4. School library	2.85	.960	Some importance
5. Staff reaction and communication	3.16	.736	High importance
6. Strict rules and regulations in school	3.49	.651	High importance
Average	**3.11**	**.501**	**High importance**

E. Family factor

This factor was found to have high importance towards student academic engagement, scoring at ($\overline{X}$ = 3.20/SD= .525). When looking at closer, only one item is found to have some importance: close contact with school by parents ($\overline{X}$ = 2.69/SD= .838). The other four items are found to have high importance: having interest and follow-up in learning by parents ($\overline{X}$ = 3.19/SD= .904); parents giving rewards or offering praise ($\overline{X}$ = 3.21/SD= .860); parents as advisors for learning ($\overline{X}$ = 3.39/SD= .643); and full support by parents ($\overline{X}$ = 3.53/SD= .672).

Table 7: Family factor

Items	$\overline{X}$	S.D	Interpretation
1. Parents giving rewards or offering praise	3.21	.860	High importance
2. Full support by parents	3.53	.672	High importance
3. Parents as advisors for learning	3.39	.643	High importance
4. Close contact with school by parents	2.69	.838	Some importance
5. Having interest and follow-up in learning by parents	3.19	.904	High importance
Average	**3.20**	**.525**	**High importance**

Looking at Table 8 below, it is shown that across 5 factors there is only one factor of Personal motivation that holds the lowest score of all ($\overline{X}$ = 2.99). That means personal motivation is found to have some importance towards learning engagement. For the other 4 factors: Peer, Teacher, School, and Family are found to have high importance. When making order by mean scores from the highest to the lowest, Teacher is scored with ($\overline{X}$ = 3.46), Peer ($\overline{X}$ = 3.41), Family ($\overline{X}$ = 3.20), School ($\overline{X}$ = 3.11), respectively.

Table 8: A Summary of 5 Factors Predicting Academic Engagement

5 Factors	$\overline{X}$	S.D	Interpretation
Personal Motivation	2.99	.390	Some importance
Peer	3.41	.417	High importance
Teacher	3.46	.329	High importance
School	3.11	.501	High importance
Family	3.20	.525	High importance

7. Responses from Interviews

The interview data is from two different groups from two different cases: Luangprabang and Vientiane. Through content analysis, it is revealed that these two factors: Peer and Family are found to be most frequently cited by the interviewees. That means peer and family influence their academic engagement. They claimed that parents fully support for their learning activities such as supporting children to do special classes, always pointing out the importance of education, warning of bad behaviors/acts, and observing of how children socialize with friends, etc. Some words from the interview support the view:

"*My parents fully support to my learning, for instance they agree and be happy with paying for me to do a special class on my preference*" said a member from G1. "*I sometimes have a problem with a lesson and I can ask for advice from sister and brother*" said a member from G2.

Peer is another factor that was further probed to participant interviewees on how peers or classmates have influence towards their academic engagement. It is revealed that participants need fun in learning because peers can create good environment in learning, especially in discussing, sharing, solving problems in learning. Participants claimed that they feel safe when learning together with friends as they can get supported and learn better through reacting with friends. Some words from the interview prove such a view: "*For me, I would say classmates motivate me to learn and they can make feel like to come to class every day and engage more in learning*" said a member from G1.

When looking at how participants view the Teacher factor, it is shown that participant interviewee claimed for the needs for a kind, and friendly teacher. The reasons for that is detailed that if teachers are not too strict or look friendly, they feel more relaxed and more comfortable to react such as asking, sharing, answering questions to teachers. Some words prove that view: "*I prefer to have a teacher who is not very strict or looks too serious. Instead, I prefer to have entertainment in learning*" said a member from G1.

Being fair by teachers is another important aspect. That means some teachers do not treat students equally, for instance giving care to a group of students over others. The following words prove that: *"For me, I would like to have teachers who are fair, who give cares or interest to every student equally"* a member from G1.

The participants agree that school is associated with their academic engagement. However, they seem not to be happy with the school and the provisions of activities. They claimed that they wish to have more activities provided by school as it is good for making friendship and relationship among students. Also, through participating in a school activity they feel to have positive relationship with school. In this regard, a recommendation for school improvement is that school should consider having stricter rules and having a strict security unit in as it helps prevent some students who skip classes during the day, for their personal time playing games or committing to similar behaviors outside school. Some words prove such a view as follow: "*I would like to recommend the school to have a stricter rule for making sure that some students who intend to skip classes get out of the school easily for personal reasons*"

7.1 Observation Data

The intention of having observation is to observe behaviors by teachers and students during classes in order to get the reality concerning their engagement in learning. For the observation, the present authors prepared an observation with evaluation criteria, adapted from Tassel-Baska and colleagues (2003), as follows: most (>75%); many (50-75%); some (25-50%); and few (<25%). Teacher and student behaviors can be observed and summarized in the following table.

Table 9: Observed behaviors of teacher and students during classes

Teacher	**Students**
Most (>75%): - teacher uses different tactics and activities to make students clear of a new lesson - teacher motivates students to share their ideas - teacher gives praises to students who answer the questions - teacher expresses friendliness and care about student learning Many (50-75%): - teacher gives appropriate time to students for a class discussion Few (<25%): - teacher moves quite little (eg. standing at the same place too long, not approaching to the tables of students or walk around the class.	Most (>75%): - Students show ambitions to the lessons, and pay great attention to teacher's instruction Many (50-75%): - Students are ready before teacher arrives in the class - Students take note during classes - Students discuss and talk to classmates about the lesson Few (<25%): - raising questions to teachers - some students are not attentive to teacher's instructions
Other observations: - before the lesson starts, students get ready as they prepare notebooks and textbooks on the table; - teacher calls students who seem not to pay attention answer a question - teacher writes lessons on the board and explain along with it - teacher reacts with students during instruction by throwing questions to ensure that students can follow or understand what has been explained	

8. Conclusion

This study found that the participants are likely to express a high level of academic engagement across three dimensions of engagement. When combining with the qualitative data (through interview and observation). It could be confirmed that participants express their engagement in learning through Emotional dimension as they perceive learning is their duty and responsibility so they need to achieve it. In addition, they view education as a useful instrument for their own lives and future professional purposes. From the observation, it is found that most of them prepare and get ready for study such as being in time to classes, attentive to lessons, listen to teacher' instructions, including having interactions with classmates and teacher during the class. Concerning the influential factors predicting their academic engagement, it is found that teacher factor is rated the highest of all, meaning that teacher strongly predicts the participants' academic engagement. When reflecting to the qualitative data, it is found that the two

types of quantitative and qualitative data are well-consistent or supportive to each other. For instance, in the interviews participants claim that they engage more in learning when teachers are kind, give care to students, not too strict and serious, friendly, and funny while teaching. In observation, it is revealed that teacher tends to interact with students and teacher encourages students into discussion. For peer, participants detail that they do not want to be absent from classes as they are happy with friends while studying in classroom. Studying with classmates or friends give students fun and they can engage more in learning. For such a trend, it is also found in class observation, students like to discuss and interact with their classmates who sit nearby, particularly when they are raise up or assign a question.

9. Discussion

In this research, the findings show that the student participants rate a high level of engagement in all dimensions. That means they perceive that they are well engaged in learning across three types of engagement: Emotional, Behavioral, and Cognitive engagement. However, looking at the mean scores, two dimensions of Emotional and Behavioral engagement are found to be scored highest of all. In a recent study, Tan (2015) found a similar finding that Singaporean secondary students engage in learning emotionally and behaviorally. However, Lao students who participated in this present study are found to have low cognitive engagement; which it could be concerned with internal motivation that makes them demotivated and not very committed to learning. Gedera, Williams, and Wright (2015) mention that motivation is considered to be the most important contributor for student academic engagement, with the internal motivation students tend to be more invested and committed to learning. Teacher is found to be a factor with high importance. This trend is also found in past researches (DeVito, 2016; Jeffrey, Milne, Suddaby, & Higgins, 2012; Nako, 2015; Zepke, Leach, & Butler, 2010). This study finds out that teacher expressing friendliness, love, and care of learners, they are more likely to engage more in learning, which is consistent with researchers (Guvenc, 2015; Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012), who mention that if students believe that teacher is willing to help or assist them to learn they become happy, and enjoyable in learning. Another finding is that Peer factor holds the second highest mean. This result seems to be consistent with Gedera, Williams, and Wright (2015) who find that the communication and interaction with classmates serve as a strong contributor for developing relationship and cooperative learning among learners that predicts students' motivation and engagement in learning.

Other scholars (O'Brien, 2015; Murray et al., 2004) found a similar trend, mentioning that through learning with peers or classmates learners can help each other, meaning that they can give encouragement and praise for learning. Similarly, it is agreed by more researchers that peer serves as a key factor predicting learners' commitment and investment in learning (Zepke *&* Leach, 2010; Witkowski, *&* Cornell, 2015)

10. Recommendations

10.1 For policy implications

Firstly, teachers should reconsider their own teaching performance and develop the teaching to match with the actuality or the reality of learners, especially making lesson plans that applies consistently and attractive to learners. The present study finds out that student participants are interested and engaged in learning across all three types of engagement. However, teachers should always be aware of attracting learners and making them invest and commit more in learning activities in classrooms and outside of school. Secondly, teachers should also consider using a student-centered approach teaching, so that students are open and given opportunities to study and work in groups with peers. In the findings, participants express their interest to learn through doing or participating in any learning related activities, so if teachers are able to provide teaching with hands-on activities students would have more engagement in learning. Simply put, teachers should not feed too much; teachers should adapt their roles as facilitators rather than as a lecturer. Thirdly, teachers should also look back and consider developing their own communication and soft skills so that they can utilize the skills in making good relationship with students, as it is proved in the present study that students prefer to have kind, caring, and creative teachers. Learning with such teachers make them learn well and learn more comfortably as they do not have any pressure. Forth, developing student engagement and learning achievement should not rely on teachers only, the directors or top administrators should also consider improving or providing teaching-learning facilities, for instance sitting places for student discussion after class. Another key point that is equally important concerns with regular follow-up of teachers by the administrators. That means administrators should have weekly and monthly meetings with teachers for discussing and solving issues encountered regarding teaching-learning process. Fifth, it is a great idea to integrate activities that invite for parents' participations. Through running this approach, parents or guardian will understand the importance and understand the school process that leads to more supports for children's learning given by parents because this parental support is found to be very supportive for students' learning engagement.

10.2 For future research

Student engagement and the factors associated with it is a complex area, so future research is strongly recommended. The present authors would like to recommend for the next research to be focusing on increased number of sample, so that it will lead to more reliable data when analyzing concerned variables. At the same time, some other research topics that are related with academic engagement, but found to be limited, are also recommended as follows.

- Secondary students' motivation towards learning
- Parental participation in secondary students' learning
- The relationship between teachers' instructional styles and academic engagement.

Acknowledgments

This work has been fully granted by the Government of Laos, through the National University of Laos. We also would like to highly appreciate it for the leadership of the Faculty of Education (FED) who facilitates and gives encouragement all the way. My sincere thanks also go to my research team: Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sithane Soukhavong, Dr. Nieo Silavong for their commitments on giving invaluable and helpful advices for the completion of this study.

About the Authors

Souksakhone Sengsouliya, a teaching faculty member at Faculty of Education, National University of Laos. His research interest focuses secondary education, learning styles, and English teaching;

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sithane Soukhavong, a Vice-Dean of Faculty of Education, National University of Laos;

Dr. Nieo Silavong, a Head of Scientific Research & Academic Services Division at Faculty of Education, National University of Laos;

Souk Sengsouliya, an administrator at RASO (Research & Academic Services Office) of National University of Laos;

Farrah Littlepage, an expert of English language teaching who is a visiting lecturer from US Embassy to the Lao PDR.

References

Ahlfeldt, S., Mehta, S., & Sellnow, T. (2005). Measurement and analysis of student engagement in university classes where varying levels of PBL methods of instruction are in use. *Higher Education Research & Development, 24*, 5-20. doi:10.1080/0729436052000318541

Alrashidi, O., Phan, H. P., & Ngu, B. H. (2016). Academic Engagement: An Overview of Its Definitions, Dimensions, and Major Conceptualisations. *International Education Studies, 9*, 41-52.

Appleton, J. J., Christenson, S. L., Kim, D., & Reschly, A. L. (2006). Measuring cogni-tive and psychological engagement: Validation of the student engagement instrument. Journal of School Psychology, 44(5), 427- 445.

Carini, R. M., Kuh, G. D., & Klein, S. P. (2004). *Student Engagement and Student Learning: Testing the Linkages.* San Diego: Department of Sociology, University of Louisville.

Coates, H. (2006). Student engagement in campus-based and online education: University connections. New York: Routledge.

Conner, T. (2011). Academic engagement ratings and instructional preferences: Comparing behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement among three school-age student cohorts. Review of Higher Education and Self-Learning, 4(13), 52-62.

DeVito, M. (2016). *Factors Influencing Student Engagement.* n.p: Sacred Heart University.

Fredricks, A. J., & McColskey, W. (2012). *The Measurement of Student Engagement: A Comparative Analysis of Various Methods and Student Self-report Instruments.* London: Human Development , Connecticut College.

Fredrick, J. A., Blumenfeld, P., & Paris, A. (2004). *The Role of School and Home in Promoting Student Engagement.* n.p: n.p.

Furrer, C. J., Skinner, E. A., & Pitzer, J. R. (2014). The Influence of Teacher and Peer Relationships on Students' Classroom Engagement and Everyday Motivational Resilience. *National Society for the Study of Education*, 101-123.

Garrett, C. (2011). Defining, Detecting, and Promoting Student Engagement in College Learning Environments. *Defining, Detecting, and Promoting Student Engagement*, 1-12.

Gedera, D., Williams, J., & Wright, N. (2015). *Identifying Factors Influencing Students' Motivation and Engagement in Online Courses.* C. Koh (ed.), Motivation, Leadership and Curriculum design. DOI 10.1007/978-981-287-230-2_2

Groves, M., Sellars, C., Smith, J., & Barber, A. (2015). Factors Affecting Student Engagement: A Case Study Examining Two Cohorts of Students Attending a Post-1992 University in the United Kingdom. *International Journal of Higher Education, 4*, 27-37.

Guvenc, H. (2015). The relationship between teachers' motivational support and engagement versus disaffection. Educational Science: Theory and Practice, 15(3), 647-657.

Hattie, J., & Anderman, E. M. (2013). International guide to student achievement. New York: Routledge.

Hart, S. R., Stewart, K., & Jimerson, S. R. (2011). *The Student Engagement in Schools Questionnaire (SESQ) and the Teacher Engagement Report Form-New (TERF-N): Examining the Preliminary Evidence.* California: University of California Santa Barbara.

Hu, Y. L., & Ching, G. (2012). Factors affecting student engagement: An analysis on how and why students learn. *Conference on Creative Education*, 989-992.

Jennings, J. M., & Angelo, T. (2006). *Student engagement: measuring and enhancing engagement with learning.* New Zealand : Behalf of Symposium participants.

Tassel-Baska, J. V., Avery, L., Struck, J., Feng, A., Brenken, B., Drummon, D., & Stambaugh, T. (2003). *The William and Mary Classroom Observation Scales Revised.* n.p: United States Department of Education.

Jeffrey, L. M., Milne, J., Suddaby, G., & Higgins, A. (2012). *Help or Hindrance: blended approaches and student engagement.* Wellington: Ako Aotearoa National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence.

Kraft, M., & Dougherty, S. (2013). The effect of teacher-family communication on studentengagement: Evidence from a randomized field experiment. Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 6, 199-222.

Martin, J., & Torres, A. (2016). *What is Student Engagement and Why is it Important?* n.p: n.p.

MoES (2018). *Educational and Sports Development Plan: A report of mid-term implementation*. Vientiane capital, Laos' Ministry of Education and Sports.

Murray, S., Mitchell, J., Gale, T., Edwards, J., & Zyngier, D. (2004). *Student disengagement from primary schooling: a review of research and practice.* n.p: Centre for Childhood Studies, Faculty of Education, Monash University.

O'Brien, M. K. B. (2015). *Factors Influencing the Academic Engagement of Upper-Division Undergraduate International Students: A Case Study of the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. (A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota).* n.p: University of Minnesota.

Olson, A., & Peterson, R. L. (2015). *Student Engagement.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Pianta, R. C., Hamre, B. K., & Allen, J. P. (2012). Teacher-Student Relationships and Engagement: Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Improving the Capacity of Classroom Interactions. *Teacher-Student Relationships and Engagement, 17*, 365-386.

Reyes, M. R., Brackett, M. A., Rivers, S. E., White, M., and Salovey, P. (2012). Classroomemotional climate, student engagement, and academic achievement. Journal of Educational Psychology, 104(3), 700-712.

Russell, B., & Slater, G. (2011). Factors that encourage student engagement: Insights from a case study of 'first time' students in a New Zealand university. Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice, 8(1), 1-15.

Sengsouliya, S., Soukhavong, S., Pongnathy, P. (2015). Instructional Barriers and PD Needs by Secondary School Teachers in Vientiane Capital. Scientific Journal of National University of Laos, Vol.8, 182-192.

Tan, Y. T. (2015). *Student Engagement in Two Singaporean Secondary Schools.* n.p: Faculty of Education, University of Jyväskylä.

Taylor, L., & Parsons, J. (2011). Improving Student Engagement. *Current Issues in Education, 14*, 1-33.

Trowler, V. (2010). *Student engagement literature review.* Heslington: Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University.

Umbach, P. D., & Wawrzynski, M. R. (2005). Faculty do matter: The role of college faculty in student learning and engagement. *Research in Higher Education, 46(2)*, 153–184.

Veiga, F. H., Burden, R., Appleton, J., Taveira, M. C., & Galvao, D. (2014). Student's Engagement in School: Conceptualization and relations with Personal Variables and Academic Performance. *Revista de Psicología y Educación*, 29-47.

Wang, M. T., & Eccles, J. S. (2013). School context, achievement motivation, and academicengagement: A longitudinal study of school engagement using a multidimensional perspective. Learning and Instruction, 28(1), 12-23.

Willms, J. D. (2003). *Student Engagement at School: a Sense of Belonging and Participation.* n.p: under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the OECD.

Witkowski, P., & Cornel, T. (2015). An Investigation into Student Engagement in Higher Education Classrooms. *Journal of Scholarly Teaching, 10*, 56- 67.

Zepke, N., Leach, L., & Butler, P. (2010). *Student Engagement: What Is It and What Influences It?* Wellington: n.p.