

# THE CLASSROOM FLOW AND ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES OF WESTERN AUSTRALIAN RURAL AND REMOTE SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper commences with a brief examination of non-metropolitan student engagement and participation in schooling. It then describes how student engagement in classroom learning was conceptualised utilising Flow Theory. The key elements in this conception were subsequently used to construct an interview schedule. The characteristics of the sample of students interviewed are presented and then the data collection procedures are explained. The application of an inductive data analysis technique to these data is explicated. The empirical results are discussed in consideration of the extant literature on student engagement and flow.

This study was part of a much larger mixed-methods investigation funded by the Australian Research Council from 2008 to 2011 and concluded in 2012. It was conducted in Western Australian public schools with the support of the, then, Department of Education and Training.

## BACKGROUND

The engagement and participation in education of Australian rural and remote students has been subject of extensive research for many years. Marks and Fleming (1999, p. 19) noted that other things being equal, "students living in non-metropolitan areas are more likely to leave school before completing Year 12. Similarly, while the school attendance by 16-year-olds across rural Australia is varied, the attendance at school in inland regions is below average compared to coastal regions (Bureau of Rural Sciences, 1999). Likewise, Ball and Lamb (2001, p. 3) stated:

*Young people who live in urban areas are more likely to remain at school than those who live in regional centres,[and] ...Of those living in rural or remote areas of Australia, 29 per cent did not complete Year 12. This rate was almost double that for young people living in urban areas (16 per cent).*

An alternative view came from Jones (2002) who also studied the effect of geographical location on educational participation, outcomes and school completion. Notwithstanding the small sample sizes and the small number of schools from which the remote-area students were selected, it was surmised that: "It is impossible to conclude ... that students from *Remote* areas experience lower rates of Year 12 completion than students from other non-metropolitan regions" (Jones, 2002, p. 22). With regard to differences in early school leaving between the five regions investigated, regional variation was significant when examined independently and this was attributed to associations with characteristics including:

Lower attainments in Year 9 reading comprehension and numeracy (more likely to leave), non-English speaking background at home (less likely to leave), gender (boys more likely to leave than girls) and, for girls only, Indigenous identification (more likely to leave). (Jones, 2002, p. vii)

Jones (2002) concluded that the effects of regional characteristics were relatively weak predictors of early school leaving and Marks and Fleming (1999) qualified this by noting that the effect applies only to males.

In general, the research indicates differential levels of engagement between metropolitan and non-metropolitan students, but this depends on how engagement is defined and gauged.

The concept of engagement has been widely explored in the literature for several decades. Though there exists a number of approaches to the definition of the concept, engagement is generally regarded as a complex notion that comprises various behaviours and attitudes. These behaviours are viewed by different researchers and theorists as “participation, identification, attachment, motivation, and membership”, while engagement at school can be described as “a student’s behavioural and psychological involvement in school curriculum” (Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007, p. 1021). More detailed definitions of student engagement include such indicators as student effort, cooperative learning, persistence, and attention (Hughes & Zhang, 2006). The ways students are engaged in classroom learning is also believed to be a consequence of positive attitudes. These are attitudes that students hold towards their school, teachers, peers and learning in general (Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson & Perry, 2006). Positive attitudes, in turn, are reinforced by constructive, active, focused and flexible interactions with school environment (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Therefore, engagement in the classroom depends on both academic activity and social integration (Janosz, Archambault, Morizot & Pagani, 2008).

It has been claimed that research on engagement should consider the multiple dimensions and facets of this complex notion. Researchers should be aware that the complexity of engagement is revealed through its influence on institutional, situational and individual factors of learning (London, Downey & Mace, 2007). The dimensions of engagement can be classified as behavioural, emotional and cognitive (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004), respectively dealing with involvement, reactions and motivation. Likewise, Wilms (2000) noted that a behavioural component (participation in school activities) and a psychological component (belonging to school and acceptance of its values), have to be taken into account. Vibert and Shileds (2003) proposed three lenses for interpreting engagement: a rational/technical lens (preparation for “out-of-the-schooling” time; an interpretive/student-centred lens (productive autonomous work); and a critical/transformational lens (transformation described in critical pedagogy). A phenomenographic investigation of New Zealand teachers’ views revealed key manifestations of student engagement (Harris, 2008). The teachers identified participation and following the rules, interest and motivation, involvement in critical thinking, learning for life and valuing learning.

Ainley (2004) also examined research perspectives on engagement. Two perspectives on motivation and engagement were identified - from the person and from the situation. The person perspective “concern[s] variables that define a characteristic or set of characteristics identifying individual differences in reactivity, sometimes as broad dispositions, predispositions or orientations, sometimes as transient states” (Ainley, 2004, p. 2). In contrast, the situation perspective “embraces research that is looking at broad, global variables such as school systems, whole-school environments, and classrooms as well as research that examines the effects of contextual variables represented by what happens in a single learning episode” (Ainley, 2004, p. 2).

In Australia, a frequently used approach for understanding engagement and participation is to statistically model the interactions between factors proposed as predictors of disengagement or non-participation. These include: national policies and state policies; the local community; the student’s family; peers; features of the school and its programs; and attributes of the individual student (Cavanagh & Reynolds, 2007). This approach typically uses demographic data to identify and quantify risk factors and basically describes attributes of the disengaged or potentially disengaged student including his/her background. Profiles of students at risk of disengagement are generated and in conjunction with other data, these can be used for the development of preventative and/or remedial programs.

However, Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, and Rumberger (2004, p. 28) cautioned that “risk factors combine in a multiplicative fashion”. Therefore, these factors need to be considered simultaneously, not separately”. In relation to educational outcomes Batten and Russell (1995, p. 50) noted:

It is indeed very difficult to define relationships between risk factors and educational outcomes with precision because the relationships are highly complex, and ultimately, not known. One thing is clear, however: the concept of single cause-effect relationships in this area is a nonsense. Relationships need to be viewed as forming a dense and complex web of inter-related, interacting, multi-directional forces.

An alternative view of engagement that emphasises the importance of students having enjoyable, satisfying and intrinsically motivating school experiences has developed from the positive psychology movement. Researchers in the USA and Australia have developed models of student engagement based on Flow Theory – the theory of optimal experiences (Cavanagh, Kennish & Sturgess, 2008; Kennish & Cavanagh, 2011; Shernoff, 2010; Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003). One of these models was used in the current study.

The following section examines how Flow Theory provides a theoretical perspective for investigating student engagement in classroom learning.

## FLOW THEORY

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) reported that when people described optimal experiences (situations which are highly enjoyable), they often used the term *flow*. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Schneider (2000, p. 97), flow refers to the "... spontaneous, seemingly effortless aspect of such experiences". A recurring aspect of flow experience descriptions is the balance between perceived high levels of *challenge* and high levels of *skill* - the task is demanding, but the enjoyment of the experience also derives from having the skills necessary to complete the task (Massimini, Csikszentmihalyi & Carli, 1988). Notwithstanding the diverse range of conceptions of engagement and disengagement previously noted, it is plausible that highly engaging activities are challenging and require high level skills. That is, being heavily engaged in an activity could well be a similar experience to flow. Conversely, activities which don't provide a challenge and only require a low level of skill are not likely to lead to the optimal experience of flow. The validity of this premise was investigated in secondary school classrooms by Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider and Shernoff (2003). Engagement was defined as high concentration, interest and enjoyment. They found that classroom engagement was maximised when perceived *challenges* and *skills* were high and in balance (Shernoff, 2010). Other investigations into schooling and student engagement using Flow Theory have studied student resilience (Parr, Montgomery & deBell, 1998), student motivation and teachers' instructional practices (Schweinle, Meyer & Turner, 2006), talented students (Whalen, 1998), second language learning (Egbert, 2003), learner motivation and behaviour in distance education (Liao, 2006), and online learners (Shin, 2006).

While Flow Theory appears to be useful for theorising about student engagement, the viability of its application in empirical investigations is dependent on operationally defining core constructs such as *challenge* and *skills* as they are experienced by engaged and disengaged students.

The skills required to achieve the outcomes expected of the student will vary according to characteristics of the instructional programme including the curriculum, subject area, and year level. The capacity of the students to achieve the expected outcomes will also vary due to differences between individual capabilities. Thus the construct of 'student skills' is a contextually and developmentally complex one which presents a problem for operationally defining the construct and also developing an instrument for measuring it in students. A solution to this problem is to view the skills required of students as a generic capability for learning then to define these capabilities in cognisance of psychological theories of learning. It is proposed that *student capability for learning* will derive from aspects of student *self-esteem*, *self-concept*, *resilience*, *self-regulation*, and *self-efficacy*. Significantly, all these student attributes have been investigated in studies of school participation and student engagement.

The contextual and developmental complexity faced when interpreting *skills* from a student learning perspective also complicates developing an operational definition for *challenge* as it is manifest in students. A solution lies in hierarchical taxonomies of learning objectives. Wiggins and McTighe (2001) developed a six-faceted model of *understanding*. They proposed that *understanding* is demonstrated when a student can *explain*, can *interpret*, can *apply*, has *perspective*, can *empathise*, and has *self-knowledge*. The six abilities have been proposed as elements of understanding. Wiggins and McTighe (2001, p. 45) stressed that "understanding is family of related abilities".

In consideration of the preceding propositions, *student engagement in learning* is defined as a balance between the student's *capability for learning* and the *expectations of learning* in a particular learning environment - both *capability* and *expectations* are context specific. Understanding the engagement in classroom learning of individual students can be enabled by collecting and interpreting information on their *capability for learning* and the *expectations of learning*. This theoretical perspective underpinned an investigation of the engagement in classroom learning of Western Australian rural and remote students.

### **Research objectives**

The aim of this study was to ascertain Western Australian rural and remote students' views of various aspects of their engagement in classroom learning. Specifically:

1. What are the key aspects of their engagement ? and
2. How do the student's describe these key aspects?

### **Procedure**

104 secondary school students from rural and remote schools in Western Australia were interviewed. The schools were not in large cities or urban centres. Each interviewee and a parent/guardian/caregiver were provided with an information sheet and signed consent was obtained. Institutional approval from the *Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee* was also obtained.

A stratified sample was chosen to include students with diverse attributes. Each student was purposively selected on the basis of gender, year of schooling and subject area reported. The sample characteristics are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Sample characteristics**

<b>Student variables</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<i>Gender</i>		
Females	57	55
Males	47	45
<i>Year of schooling</i>		
Yr 8	6	6
Yr 9	12	11
Yr 10	24	23
Yr 11	34	33
Yr 12	28	27
<i>Subject reported</i>		
English	37	36
Maths	31	30
S&E	14	13
Science	22	21
<b>Total sample</b>	<b>104</b>	<b>100</b>

The interviews commenced with the researchers introducing themselves and the purposes of the study. The introductions were:

- We are from the Department of Education and Training in Perth and Curtin University;
- We are looking at student engagement in the classroom;
- 100 students from around the state are being interviewed; and
- What we find will be made available publicly, but your own comments will remain private.

These were followed by some 'warm up' questions that also elicited background data on each student. These were:

- What year are you in? What do you want to do when you leave school? Why is that?
- What about your schooling? Do you enjoy school or not? Why? Why not?
- What lessons or aspects of school do you like the most? Like least? Why?
- What is it about them that you enjoy?

The students were then asked questions about their flow and engagement experiences. Five questions were asked about capability for learning (*self-esteem, self-concept, resilience, self-regulation* and *self-efficacy*), and six questions were asked about the expectations of their learning (*interpretation, application, perspective, empathy* and *self-knowledge*). The interview questions were:

1. How good do you feel about yourself and what you can do in <this class>? Can you give us some examples of this?
2. How do you see yourself in comparison to other students in <this class>? Is the class streamed or in levels? Where are you placed in the class? Do you think about it? Does it make you feel good? Can you give us some examples of this?
3. How do you cope, manage or get on when problems arise in <this class>? When things go wrong? When you don't get the results you want? Can you give us some examples of this?
4. Do you think you are in charge (control) of your own learning in this class? This may include discipline and behaviour. Do you use techniques to learn (take notes, review notes after class, etc). Can you give us some examples of this? Do you look after your learning or is the teacher in charge?
5. How much effort will you make and continue making to be successful in this class? Can you give us some examples of this?
6. Are you expected to talk or write about what you have learnt? This could be discussions or essays or assignments. To what extent, do you add your own words? Can you give us some examples of this?
7. Is it expected that you will extend or add to what you have been taught? Do they expect you to build on the basics you are given in class? Or do you write down what's on the board only? Can you give us some examples of this?
8. Are you expected to use what you have learnt? For example, to solve new problems or fix something. This may be in the class or in other classes or elsewhere in your life. Can you give us some examples of this?
9. Are you expected to know what others believe in or value? Do you look at things from others points of view? This could be in class with the other students in discussions, or it could be in the topic you are learning. Can you give us some examples of this?
10. Are you expected to adapt your own views or ways of doing things to fit in with others? This could be in teamwork. Can you give us some examples of this?
11. Are you expected to show that you are aware of your own strengths and weaknesses? Do you know what your strengths and weaknesses are, and is that something you are expected to know? Can you give us some examples of this?

Each interview was conducted by two researchers and digitally recorded. At the conclusion of the interviews the data available for analysis were the audio recordings and summary sheets. The audio recordings were examined and key comments from each student were transcribed and stored in a spread sheet. The data were analysed using an inductive process – a form of analytic induction (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). "The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies" (Thomas, 2006, p. 2). While the interview questions were semi-structured and based on eleven sub-constructs, this structure was not used for analysing the data. Alternatively, the data were scanned, categories were generated, and associations between categories were identified. The process was exploratory and not intended to generate theory or establish generalisable relationships.

## RESULTS

### *(a) Classification and coding*

The 104 summary sheets and transcriptions were perused by two researchers who identified five broad categories thought suitable for classifying the majority of the data. These were:

1. Relationships;
2. Focus- process of being focused (e.g. concentration) and the object of the focus (e.g. learning);
3. Instructional design;
4. Facilities; and
5. External environments.

However, when the data were coded according to this classification, the manifest content in the student comments was not sufficiently well defined by these five categories. In particular, *focus*, *instructional design* and *facilities* were ambiguous and lacked clarity. A re-examination of the data showed that most of it (~ 95%) concerned *relationships*, *learning orientation*, and student *confidence*. The remaining data (~ 5%) centred on *out-of-school activities* including *homework*. Student comments about these aspects of themselves and their engagement in learning were then identified, coded and then entered into a spreadsheet for a more detailed analysis.

The analysis revealed that student comments on *relationships* (Category 1.0) were predominantly about:

*Classmates* (Category 1.1);  
*The teacher* (Category 1.2); and  
*Parents* (Category 1.3).

The comments on *learning orientation* (Category 2.0) described the students':

*Own learning* (Category 2.1);  
*Learning with others* (Category 2.2); and  
*Teacher instruction* (Category 2.3).

The comments on *confidence* (Category 3.0) concerned:

*Faith in ability* (Category 3.1);  
*Perseverance* (Category 3.2);  
*Reservations* (Category 3.3); and  
*Anxiety* (Category 3.4).

The final category of *out-of-school activities* (Category 4.0) included:

*Homework* (Category 4.1); and  
*Other commitments* (Category 4.2).

A more detailed examination of the data indicated a third level of categorisation was appropriate for most of the second level categories. For example, *relationships* with *classmates* were explained by some students as *supportive* of their learning (Category 1.1.1), and by other students as *disruptive* (Category 1.1.2). Consequently a three-level classification schema was used to interpret the data. This is presented in Table 2 which also shows the percentage of total comments for each category in the schema.

**Table 2: Classification schema**

Level One	Level Two	Level Three	
1.0 Relationships (20.7%)	1.1 Classmates (7.1%)	1.1.1 Supportive (3.9%) 1.1.2 Disruptive (3.2%)	
	1.2 The teacher (12.5%)	1.2.1 Encourages students (5.0%) 1.2.2 Commands respect (1.1%) 1.2.3 Alienates students (6.4%)	
	1.3 Parents (1.1%)	1.3.1 Exercise influence (1.1%)	
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2.0 Learning orientation (50.2%)	2.1 Own learning (32.4%)	2.1.1 Self-reflection (10.0%) 2.1.2 Motivation (4.3%) 2.1.3 Application (11.0%) 2.1.4 Avoiding application (7.1%)	
	2.2 Learning with others (10.7%)	2.2.1 Competing (3.2%) 2.2.2 Asking and listening (3.2%) 2.2.3 Contributing (3.2%) 2.2.4 Off-task (1.1%)	
	2.3 Teacher instruction (7.1%)	2.3.1 Self regulation (3.2%) 2.3.2 Direction (3.9%)	
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	3.0 Confidence (23.5%)	3.1 Faith in ability (8.2%)	3.1.1 Academic performance (3.9%) 3.1.2 General outlook (4.3%)
		3.2 Perseverance (3.6%)	3.2.1 Efficacious (3.6%)
3.3 Reservations (8.5%)		3.3.1 Qualification (1.4%) 3.3.2 Inconsistency (4.6%) 3.3.3 Weaknesses (2.5%)	
3.4 Anxiety (3.2%)		3.4.1 Tests (1.4%) 3.4.2 Self doubt (1.8%)	
4.0 Out-of-school activities (5.7%)	4.1 Homework (3.2%)	4.1.1 Completing homework (1.8%) 4.1.2 Not completing homework (1.4%)	
	4.2 Other commitments (2.5%)	4.2.1 Recreation, sport and community (2.5%)	
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**(b) The meaning of the categories**

The following section uses examples of student comments to illustrate the meaning of the respective categories. Each interviewee is identified by a code in parentheses comprising a letter and numeral.

**1. Relationships**

*Relationships with classmates* were viewed as both *supportive* and *disruptive*. Friendships provide assistance in dealing with difficult matters - *friends sometimes deal with big problems* (BU02). Peer relationships also allow for expression of opinions and the provision of assistance - *[I] listen to other's opinions and bring together* (G18) and *I feel like the second teacher, it's easy for me, so I help others* (N013). The negative side of peer relationships includes bullying - *bullying is a major issue* (BU06); and students being distracted from their work - *it's hard to concentrate if it's too noisy* (B08), *there are a lot of class distractions* (GO25), *I avoid sitting with others who will distract me* (GO25), and *the class stuffs around when I want to work* (NO31).

Relationships with the teachers were also perceived in different ways. Some teachers were seen to be supportive – the teacher "bonds" with students. She shows us her life experiences to help us (N030), and my teacher tries to get us to keep a positive attitude (N014). A small number of students reported having respect for their teacher - do what the teacher says (G13), and what teacher says is best (G14). However, other students were highly critical of the teacher and their relationship - [I] go to other teachers to get help (N04), she ignores us so we help each other out (N04), the teacher does not expect much of me (NO27), and [I] like the subject and school, but disappointed in teachers (BU04).

Only a small number of students mentioned their parents and they provided limited examples of how their relationship with either their mother or father influenced their engagement at school.

## **2. Learning orientation**

Half of the data were about *student learning orientation* and referred to the students learning as individuals (*own learning*), *learning with others (peers)*, and learning from the teacher (*teacher instruction*).

Four aspects of *own learning* were identified – self-reflection, motivation, application, and avoiding application. Students recounted how they reflected on the progress of their learning - *I think about my mistakes* (GO36), *[I] focus on strengths and weaknesses* (G18), and *tests tell me about my strengths and weaknesses* (NO21). They expressed various reasons for being motivated - *I like it when I get a high score* (B09), *doing it because I have to* (D07), and *I have goals. I want to do nursing at Uni so I want to do well* (GO31). Application to own learning was illustrated by attitudes and behaviours such as - *I'll put all my effort into it* (NO28), *I go over things to improve* (GO30, *[I] like to get right into assignments as soon as possible* (BU03), and *[I] work hard to figure problems on my own* (BU04). In contrast, some students explained they deliberately avoided or ignored press for participating in classroom activities and completing tasks intended to further their learning - *I know how to apply myself, I just don't* (K03), *I just quit when it gets hard* (NO16,) *I don't care. I don't see the point of being here* (NO30), and *if I don't graduate, I'll deal with it* (NO30).

Students suggested four types of behaviours when *learning with others* – competing, asking and listening, contributing, and off-task. Competing with others was seen as a motivational strategy - *who doesn't compare, look at how you can improve* (B08), *comparing with others motivates me* (NO15), and *competing with a friend motivates me* (NO12). Asking and listening were important aspects of working together – *no right or wrong, listen to others* (B08), *I ask others and get help, it's okay* (GO20), and *good to know and ask others about useful strategies* (G18). Students who contributed were active participants – *we explain to others what we understand* (N01), *we have discussions and compare answers* (NO14), and *we need to explain things to our friends so we learn from each other* (NO22). The off-task aspect showed that learning with others does not necessarily happen - *the class is lazy so I do no work* (GO33), *I talk and get off the topic* (GO34), and *we don't do much. We just make jokes and laugh* (NO27).

Two emphases of *teacher instruction* emerged from the data – self-regulation and direction. Self-regulating learning is encouraged when – *[the] teacher looks at what you can and can't do - she wants you to figure it out* (B06), *she will ask us to explain HOW we know that* (GO38), and *my teacher guides us but lets us be* (NO11). Alternatively some teachers were more direct in their instruction – *[the] teacher makes it easy to learn because she explains things clearly* (B09), *I am aware of my errors, the teacher tells me* (GO25), and *most of our choices are teacher-directed* (GO29).

## **3. Confidence**

Student *confidence* was associated with four attributes - faith in ability, perseverance, reservations, and anxiety. Some students' faith in their ability derived from their academic performance - *I know I can improve my grades* (NO29), *I am very confident. I am an "A"* (GO27), *[I'm] pretty good at Science* (K01). Other students' had a general sense of surety about their confidence – *feel confident, can do it* (BU05), *better this year, more confident* (BU09), and *I do expect difficulties to work out* (GO27).

Very persistent students were efficacious – always try, never give up (G18), nah, I will not give up (GO22), and I keep trying till I know it (GO28).

Students with less confidence expressed some reservations by qualifying their view, noting inconsistency in confidence across different situations, or identifying weaknesses in their learning.

Qualification - *it confuses me so I don't like it, but I'm confident* (GO28) and *if I thought I could do it, and I probably could then* (GO 34). Inconsistency - *I can't do problems, I can do numbers* (NO27), and *I can do some things, but most of it is too hard* (GO37). Weaknesses - *[I] Feel lost* (D06) and *I'm lowest in class, and everyone understands but me* (GO37).

Some anxiety emanated from experience in tests - *very stressed with tests* (BU10) and *the day of a test I get anxious* (NO15); General self doubt was also associated with anxiety - *I get a bit panicky* (B07) and *not much faith in my ability* (NO22).

#### **4. Out-of-school activities**

Homework and other commitments constituted out-of-school activities. Completing and not completing homework were referred to - *[I] do lots of homework* (BU04) and *[I] don't do homework* (N04). Other commitments - *I coach a lot and have other commitments - that makes it hard* (GO28) and *I have many after school activities* (NO22).

In summary, the interview data on student engagement in classroom learning was classified into three levels. The first level comprised five categories, the second level comprised 12 categories and the third level comprised 27 categories. The predominant constructs were relationships, orientation to learning, and confidence. For each of these constructs there was strong evidence of positive and negative influences on engagement.

## **DISCUSSION**

The following discussion is organised according to the data classification categories.

First, *relationships* are a frequently acknowledged aspect of engagement. Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson and Perry (2006) viewed school engagement as positive attitudes towards classmates and teachers. When Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) classified the research on engagement, one of the classifications focussed on positive and negative reactions to teachers and classmates. Janosz, Archambault, Morizot and Pagani (2008) considered that social integration within the school (e.g. social isolation/rejection, quality of student-teacher relationships) characterises school engagement. Experiencing acceptance, being able to contribute, and cooperating with others in relationships are also flow-related engagement experiences that have been empirically identified (Shernoff, Tonks & Abdi, 2013). Similarly, in research into flow and student engagement, Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider and Shernoff (2003) measured factors of mood and esteem including feeling sociable, meeting the expectations of others, being proud and having control. The relationship between the student and the teacher is particularly important and this importance is reflected in the data from this study by the proportion of references to relationships with the teacher - 12.5% of the total comments. The small number of comments about relationships with parents is due to the interview questions being focussed on classroom experiences.

Second, student's and teacher's *orientation to learning* is a fundamental aspect of engagement in the learning. Hughes and Zhang (2006, p. 406) defined classroom engagement to be indicated by "student effort, attention, persistence, and cooperative participation in learning". Similarly, Shernoff, Tonks and Abdi (2013) viewed academic intensity (challenge, concentration, high skill level and trying hard), as an element of classroom engagement and flow. Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider and Shernoff (2003, p. 164) defined this as "the challenge and importance found in classroom activities and the amount of concentration demanded". Positive attitudes toward academic learning are part of school engagement (Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson and Perry, 2006). The behavioural classification of engagement research includes involvement in academic activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004). Students owning and valuing learning was identified in a study of teacher perspectives on engagement (Harris, 2008). Flow Theory engagement research also recognises the importance of student experiences of classroom instruction and learning (Shernoff, Tonks & Abdi, 2013). For this study, half of the comments (50.2%) concerned *orientation to learning*.

Third, student *confidence* is important for student engagement and nearly one quarter (23.5%) of the comments concerned this. In the literature, Hughes and Zhang (2006) noted that student persistence indicates classroom engagement. Furrer and Skinner (2003) also associated student persistence with engagement. In a study of university student engagement, London, Downey and Mace (2007, p. 456)

proposed that engagement encompassed “individual factors include[ing] competence beliefs, concerns and expectations of bias around social identities, and conception and of coping with the context”. Harris (2008, p. 65) reported that teachers viewed engaged students as “being motivated and confident in participation in what happens at school”. Intrinsic motivation and vitality in the Flow Theory engagement research (being happy, creative, excited and active), are also associated with student *confidence* (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider & Shernoff, 2003; Shernoff, Tonks & Abdi, 2013).

Fourth, while out-of-school activities were not a major constituent of the comments (5.7%), engagement with school or schooling is often associated with participation in extra-curricular activities (Janosz, Archambault, Morizot & Pagani, 2008). Classifications of engagement research include involvement in social or school activities, and in extra-curricular activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004).

## CONCLUSION

The results present a snapshot of Western Australian rural and remote secondary school student engagement from the perspective of enjoyable and positive classroom experiences. The four major groups of student experiences (*relationships, learning orientation, confidence and out-of-school activities*), and the respective sub-groups, are illustrated by the students’ own words. While some of the student experiences with their teacher were not reported positively, on the whole the results portray the students having supportive relationships, being self-reflective, being self-regulating, being motivated, and applying themselves to their schoolwork. The results also show some students have negative experiences that are not conducive to engagement including alienation by the teacher, disruption from peers, and reservations about their confidence.

Ascertaining the perceptions of individual students about their capabilities and the experiences that provide them with intrinsic motivation provides a foundation for the design of interventions and programs to increase engagement. The four-group classification of experiences generated in this study along with the respective student elaborations, could inform such initiatives. The classification and examples were obtained from a large and diverse sample of Western Australian rural and remote secondary school students which would render this material most relevant to students and teachers.

Finally, along with the notion of well-being, flow is a foundational constructs of positive psychology (Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2010). Application of a Flow Theory approach to examine the engagement of students shifts focus from the traditional concerns with conditions of failure and disadvantage to a positive outlook concerned with identifying success and building on satisfying experiences.

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