

Theoretical Framework

Student engagement is at the heart of the Vista Condor learning experience. We use the word “engagement” to characterize our approach to life’s myriad experiences- from the mundane to those we consider significant. Engagement is an act that connects us to each other and to the physical world. We describe students who are focused, actively involved in school’s social and educational opportunities, and academically successful as “engaged” (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Steele, 2003). It is also understandable that researchers have looked for a connection between student engagement and achievement as they have sought to understand the variation in student success and the gaps in opportunity among students of different genders, races and ethnicities, religions, and socioeconomic status (Christenson et al., 2008).

To determine programs, procedures, and processes, Vista uses a framework applied in recent studies examining the role of engagement in outperforming urban schools. This framework consists of three separate, but interrelated, types of student engagement: (a) emotional, (b) behavioral, and (c) cognitive (Appleton et al., 2008). Each of the three types has indicators that represent various levels of engagement within that particular domain. The researchers found that when emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement is optimized, students can experience a state of “flow.” As defined below, flow indicates a high level of engagement in which individuals are profoundly absorbed in a task to the point of losing awareness of time and space (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Shernoff, 2013).

Although many elements are implicated in the performance gaps the plague urban students, certain elements fall under the purview of the school site and thus merit close study. The research often mitigates the role of students’ social capital-- or lack thereof-- in the complex construct of student engagement. Stanton-Salazar (1997) has defined social capital as institutional resources and opportunities, such as knowledge of school programs, academic tutoring and mentoring, and how to access assistance with career decision-making and college admission. For a great number of economically disenfranchised students attending urban schools, access to social capital is severely limited, if not completely absent from their social context (Roderick et al., 2009).

This framework is based on the work of Vista Charter Public Schools’ Superintendent, Dr. Donald Wilson and a team from the University of Southern California that conducted an extensive review of the literature on engagement and achievement that looked closely at the work of Urie Bronfenbrenner (Neal & Neal, 2013). Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory explores the interrelated nature of nested systems in human development (Neal & Neal, 2013). Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory includes the macrosystem, exosystem, meso- and microsystems. These systems and their influence on human development is included in the conceptual framework (Chart 1). The macrosystem, or attitudes and ideologies of the culture, combine with a student’s microsystem in which emotional, behavioral, and cognitive engagement plays a significant role in his or her academic achievement. The flow chart below presents a visual representation of this theory.

Chart 1: Macrosystem Framework as part of Brofenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Flow Theory

In short, the framework will provide the basis of the pedagogical stance that our school must provide instruction that gives students the opportunity to build social and emotional capital, as well as acquire strong academic and technical skills. The three domains of engagement must be present, as student achievement informs our decision-making process for adopting all programs, procedures, and processes. Further, we look at programs that provide engagement in multiple domains. For instance, while Kagan Cooperative Strategies provides structures to increase cognitive engagement, they are embedded in social/emotional strategies like complimenting a partner, greetings, and thanking teams and partners after working together. Further, they address behavioral issues of staying on task, participation, and attention.

Another example of how Vista interleaves multiple systems is through Way of Council, which, at first glance, seems to exclusively serve the emotional domain in which students have an adult advocate and supportive peers, and experience a safe space of belonging. However, Way of Council also grants students many opportunities to reflect

about how their own thinking affects outcomes and strengthens the internal locus of control, thus increasing cognitive engagement. Importantly, Way of Council has been shown to decrease behavioral issues and gives students the tools to solve interpersonal issues. A description of the main components of the framework is detailed in the following sections.

Achievement Gap for Underserved Populations

While there have been some overall improvements for all students of all races, the gap has persisted, with a majority of Black and Latino students across the United States still lagging far behind their White counterparts (Torlakson, 2013). While educational researchers and practitioners have looked at a breadth of possible reasons for this achievement gap, as well as pledging practices to close it, a definitive body of research that points to universal solutions is yet to appear. There is, however, increasing academic interest and emphasis on the importance of supportive instructional strategies such as scaffolding and formulating safety nets for at-risk students (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Building on earlier seminal work that sought to broaden the definition of school engagement (Finn, 1989; Marks, 2000), a burgeoning body of more recent work has emerged to coalesce a multi-faceted understanding of what school engagement is and how it affects student outcomes, both pre- and post-high school graduation (Furlong et al., 2003). In fact, research has become comprehensively clear that engagement is a critical factor in positive student outcomes (Shernoff et al., 2003). This is crucially important as many researchers regard the opposite of engagement as disengagement (Fredricks & McColksley, 2012), and research is very clear that student disengagement is a primary factor in poor performance, dropout rates, and even prison for Black and Latino boys (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Further, multiple studies have shown a significant correlation between engagement and achievement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). With researchers suggesting that between 25% and 66% of students may be disengaged (Finn, 1989; Taylor & Parsons, 2011), it is worth recognizing that engagement may be a probable North Star for promising practices that address the needs of at-risk students.

Disengagement Begins in Kindergarten

Student engagement has primarily and historically focused upon increasing achievement, positive behaviors, and a sense of belonging so that students will remain in school (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). Because the focus has been primarily on high school completion, newer research on student engagement has targeted students in middle school and high school, where disengagement typically becomes a concern, and student engagement has been seen as a way to reclaim a minority of predominantly socio-economically disadvantaged students at risk of dropping out of high school (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). It is clear that disengagement behaviors do not start in middle or high school and that metrics of high school success or failure can be seen as the culmination of a lifelong process that started in a student's earliest years (Fredricks & McColksley, 2012). Thus, understanding the role engagement plays in student academic success requires that we closely attend to students starting in pre-k and positively affect outcomes for at-risk students.

Theoretical Models of Engagement

Researchers have developed diverse theoretical conceptualizations of engagement. While the literature reviewed for this petition draws upon different theoretical models and definitions of engagement, general agreement on different types of engagement does exist. The areas with most harmony were social engagement, which includes both affective and cognitive definitions defined as a sense of belonging, attachment, group identification, membership (Furlong et al., 2003). A third emerging area of agreement was academic or cognitive involvement that affects competency, efficacy, and the prospect of life-long learners (Appleton et al., 2008). For purposes of this petition and an emerging theoretical conceptualization, engagement is understood as a multifaceted construct that can be categorized into behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Appleton et al., 2008).

Behavioral engagement

Behavioral engagement was historically and is still generally defined quantitatively through attendance rates, office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions (Finn, 1989; Fredricks & McColksley, 2012). Further studies have classified participation under behavioral engagement, which can be measured qualitatively and includes paying attention, responding to teacher's questions, asking for help, and discipline issues such as following rules and acting respectfully toward teachers and classmates (Finn, 1989; Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Most importantly, the research is clear that behavioral engagement has a significant effect on achievement (Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Furlong et al., 2003;

Taylor & Parsons, 2011). This strong correlation to achievement gives hope to the idea that learning how to manipulate engagement behaviors may provide important pathways to narrowing or closing the achievement gap.

Emotional engagement

There is a strong correlation between behavior and more affective student engagement, herein referred to as emotional engagement, which is commonly defined as identification and feeling a part of school or class community (Appleton et al., 2008). This idea was reiterated in multiple studies that surveyed for student attitudes about school identification and participation rates, which overwhelmingly found that students rated their engagement higher in schools and classrooms where mutual respect was fostered, strong discipline policies guided cultural norms, and teachers actively sought to build strong relationships with students (Shernoff et al., 2003; Appleton et al., 2008; Taylor & Parsons, 2011; Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Cognitive engagement

Cognitive engagement is generally seen as a student's investment in learning (Fredricks & McColskey, 2012) and is denoted by students' psychological investment and the quality of their engagement, in contrast to their physical (behavioral) efforts (Pintrich, 2003). In this way, teachers may perceive students to be engaged due to their behavior, but still not achieving due to an overall lack of cognitive engagement in the work. Cognitive engagement is perceived through student behaviors that may include persistence, going the extra mile, extending learning on their own, and using self-regulation strategies to accomplish tasks and guide learning (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

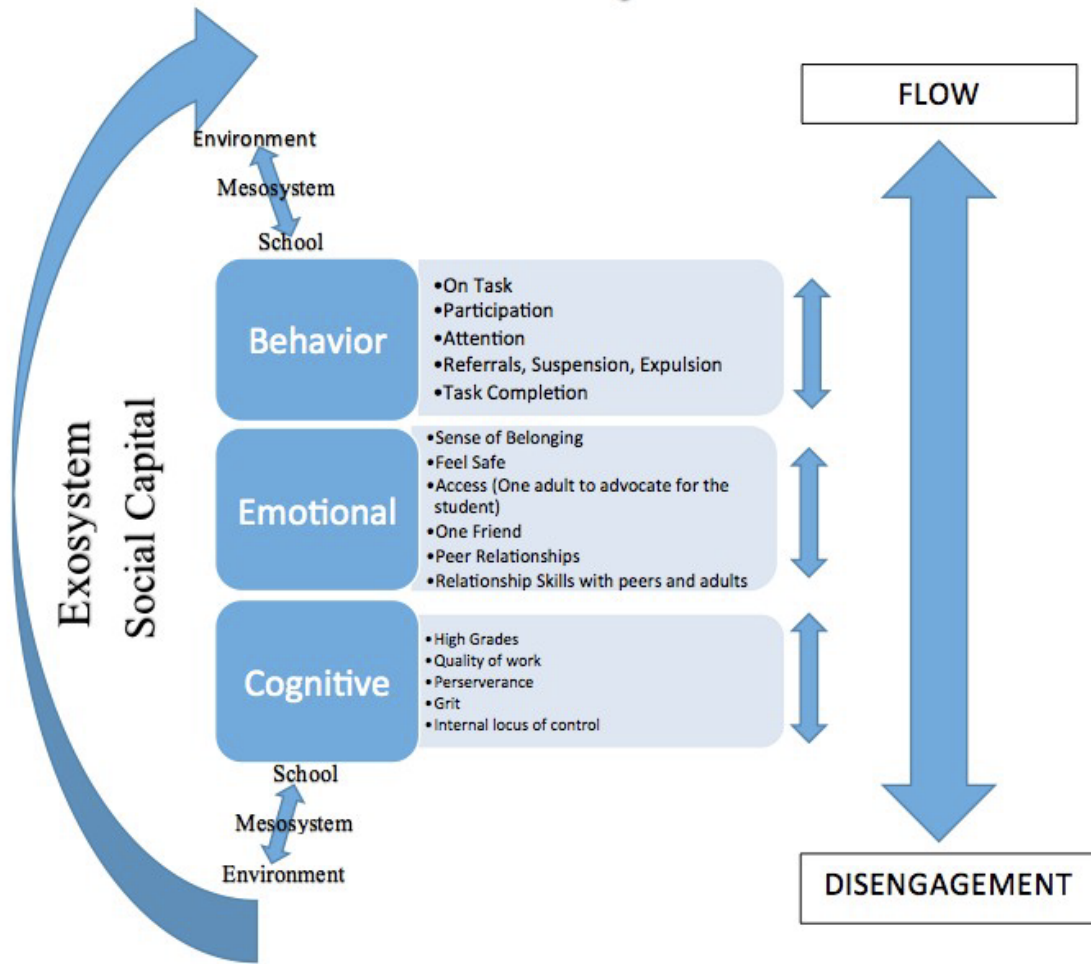
Theory of Flow and Engagement

One distinct branch of student engagement research focuses on the emotional state of the learner when physically engaged in a task, and seeks to understand what conditions should be present to produce this state. This research, based on Flow Theory, is a critical philosophical component of the Vista experience. Flow Theory was first proposed by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. A state of flow can best be described as total absorption and immersion in an activity. A student in flow will exhibit intense concentration, interest, and enjoyment (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). When a person is in flow, her or she can stay engaged in an activity and disregard time, food, and other interests or needs. In flow, a student feels not only pleasure in the activity, but more importantly, and for educational implications, successful and competent (Shernoff et al., 2003).

One of the main principles of Flow Theory is that students feel a deep sense of success about an activity that forces them to stretch themselves just beyond their limit (Shernoff et al., 2003). This state of optimal engagement can be traced to the work of Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist who introduced the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1987). ZPD is described as the bridge between what a student cannot do and what a student could do with a little help. This theory will be reflected in almost every aspect of the Condor Academy experience via the application of a workshop model. Self-efficacy also has a positive effect on engagement, which in turn affects overall achievement. Condor Academy will help students achieve this state by providing them with mastery experiences that scaffold key information and modeling by those that have already been successful in a given task (Furlong et al., 2003). Further, we recognize the importance of understanding which instructional practices show the strongest promise in helping students achieve a state flow in their learning.

At Vista, all programs, processes, and procedures are evaluated using Flow Theory before adoption, with the belief that increasing engagement in the three domains will drive increases in our students' joy and passion in their education, develop a life-long love of learning, and, ultimately, bridge the achievement gap.

Macrosystem



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