

What Does an Engaged Preschool Classroom Look Like? Teachers' Conceptions of Student Engagement- Voices from Malaysia

Armeetaa Kaur Mallanhanse
QUEST International University, Malaysia

Amrita Kaur¹⁾
Wenzhou Kean University

Rosna Awang Hashim
Universiti Utara Malaysia

Mohammad Noman
Wenzhou Kean University

Abstract

School engagement is at the heart of academic success both for teachers and students at all levels of education. Conceptualizing and examining preschool students' engagement is a complex task, as the engagement of preschool students may vary based on the school and cultural context. Using an exploratory qualitative research design, the current study investigates the conception of preschool students' engagement in the Malaysian context. Seven preschool teachers with significant teaching experience recruited through purposive sampling participated in semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews to share their visions of students' engagement. Inductive data analysis suggested that the teachers' conceptions of students' engagements were grounded in students' behavioral (responsiveness, commitment and effort, and body language) and emotional (positive reactions and positive social sense) indicators leaving out cognitive indicators. While the findings provide new, context-specific insights into the conceptualization of students' engagement from collectivist cultures, which uphold respect, compliance, self-control, and order in the classroom settings, it shows teachers' conceptions of engagement are mapped on macro-level observation and completely ignore the micro-level responses of students. The findings discuss the malleable and culturally sensitive nature of school engagement at the preschool level. It discusses its implication for teachers' development and students' engagement at the preschool level.

Keywords : School engagement, preschool, collectivist culture, behavioral, emotional, cognitive, Malaysia.

Corresponding author, ¹⁾ akaur@kean.edu

Introduction

Over the past few decades, student engagement has received significant attention. Many researchers have studied it in view of its huge potential to resolve compelling educational issues such as high dropout rates, low academic achievement, and low retention rates among students (Wang & Fredricks, 2014; Yang et al., 2018). Various labels have been designated to the term engagement, such as school engagement, student engagement, learning engagement, or even learning approaches; however, all these labels imply and convey a similar notion (Halliday et al., 2018) of demonstrating links between students, learning environment and learning. Conceptualizations of engagement are plentiful, and settling on a primary definition has been challenging for researchers (Appleton et al., 2008; Trowler, 2010). Researchers worldwide have agreed to accept a set of core characteristics representing the general conceptualization of engagement. First, engagement exists on a continuous scale ranging from fully engaged to disengaged. Second, engagement is malleable and capable of changing through intervention or over time. Finally, engagement is best represented as a multidimensional or a meta-construct (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks, 2011; Trowler, 2010).

With it having been accepted as a multidimensional construct, several models of engagement are proposed. For example, one of the most cited models, Fredricks(2011) engagement model, comprises three important dimensions: behavior, cognitive and emotional engagement, representing the essence of a meta construct. Even though these three dimensions are commonly examined individually in research, evidence demonstrates that these dimensions are dynamically interrelated with each other (Fredricks, 2011). Behavioral engagement refers to observed actions in the classroom, such as students' involvement and participation in both academic and non-academic activities. Emotional engagement implies students' affective responses to learning. Cognitive engagement reflects students' willingness to invest the effort to comprehend and master the necessary task and skills in learning (Fredricks, 2011; Wigfield & Guthrie, 2000). A new dimension of agentic engagement defined by students' constructive contribution to the flow of the instruction they receive' (Reeve & Tseng 2011, p2) expands the conceptualization of student engagement.

To date, there has been extensive research in assessing student engagement. This construct has also been linked with many other variables in determining the predictors and the consequences of student engagement. Studies have shown that psychological and social factors foster or hinder student engagement (Buhs et al., 2018; Awang-Hashim et al., 2015). Evidence demonstrates that students who are highly engaged in learning ask questions to satisfy their curiosity, enjoy challenging tasks, and display a high commitment which eventually leads them to succeed in their academic life (Kaur & Noman, 2020, Salanova et al., 2010). Also, engaged young students are more likely to embrace positive attitudes and habits and, at the same time, keenly apply the acquired skills. They also tend to develop constructive and healthy relationship with their teachers and peers.

Consequently, these learning approaches prevent them from experiencing negative or destructive engagement in their school life (Halliday et al., 2018; Vitiello et al., 2012). On the other hand, disengaged students are more inclined to exhibit behaviors such as not investing sufficient time and effort in learning, not attending classes regularly, and a lack of active and dynamic involvement in related academic activities (Bakker et al., 2014). Preschools foster school readiness over time by preparing young children cognitively and emotionally to transition from an unstructured learning environment to a more formal learning environment in their elementary school (Sabol, et al., 2018; Williford et al., 2013). Additionally, the recognition of the value of childhood and the significance of environmental factors that facilitate preschoolers' growth and development has changed the early childhood education paradigm. Thus, the role of student engagement becomes equally significant for preschool education.

Literature Review

Predictors of Engagement at Preschool

Scholars around the world regard preschool as a crucial setting where essential learning experiences are provided for children. It facilitates not only the academic but also the emotional, social, and civic development of young children (Cadima et al., 2015; Goble et

al., 2017; Hernandez et al., 2017). Studies have shown that preschoolers with higher classroom engagement demonstrate greater language and literacy skills, greater gains in their self-regulatory skills, and enhanced school readiness (Sabol, et al., 2018; Williford et al. 2013). In addition, studies have also depicted that children who demonstrate higher engagement in their classroom were reported to have a similar engagement level during their first grade (Goble et al., 2017; Cadima, et al., 2015). This implies that preschool engagement is likely to determine future student engagement. Engagement at the preschool level has also been a predictor of emotional expressivity in grade 1. Children engaged in their learning during their preschool education were seen to experience and articulate positive emotions during grade one compared to students who were disengaged during their preschool (Hernandez et al., 2017). This accentuates the huge potential of this construct for students' emotional experiences at preschool.

Indicators of Engagement at preschool: How much do we know?

Traditionally in elementary and tertiary education, student engagement is measured through self-report questionnaires using items that indicate completion of classroom tasks on time and its quality, attendance, positive conduct, paying attention, asking questions, interest, enjoyment, concentration on tasks and effort, etc. (Engels et al., 2021; Chiu. 2021; Kaur et al., 2015). However, studies focusing on preschool students have primarily relied on teachers or parents' reported measures or observational measures of preschool students' engagement (Cadima, et al., 2015; Vitiello et al., 2012) due to the limited cognitive and verbal capabilities of preschool children in explicitly reporting their engagement experiences. Cadima et al. (2015) employed the Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (TRSSA; Birch & Ladd, 1997) to measure the behavioural engagement of preschool students using five subscales measure - preschoolers school liking, school avoidance, cooperative participation, self-directedness, and independent participation. A short version of the same scale (Betts & Rottenberg, 2007) uses items like “follows teacher’s directions,” “notices when other kids are absent,” “laughs or smiles easily,” “shows enthusiasm,” etc. to demonstrate preschoolers’ engagement. Other studies have emphasized positive and frequent interaction with peers and teachers as an indicator of

preschool students' emotional engagement (Pianta et al., 2005). A close investigation of preschool students' engagement and its measures suggests that its indicators emanate from traditional measures and conceptualization of student engagement rooted in school and post-secondary contexts. Thus, the question is whether preschoolers' engagement indicators differ from school and post-secondary students.

The second question that arises while discussing preschool student engagement in diverse cultural contexts is the consistency of engagement indicators across cultures. Studies in Asian settings inform students' learning styles (Kaur et al., 2014; Littlewood, 2001) and teaching techniques (Kaur & Noman, 2015) employed by teachers in Asia and highlight the role of the cultural conception of good teaching and effective learning. For example, in Asian preschool education, tidy and well-kept classrooms, students queueing in a perfectly straight line, or sitting quietly and attentively are conceptions of ideal classrooms (Chen et al., 1992; Li et al., 2016). In general, asking too many questions, not taking turns, or indulging in debates with peers and teachers may be considered inappropriate, self-expression and open expression of emotions are not encouraged, and teachers' classes are structured and controlled (Kaur, 2020). It would be interesting to examine the conception of preschool teachers with such a cultural orientation.

Furthermore, studies concerning students' engagements are concentrated on primary (Dunstan, 2017; Awang-Hashim et al., 2015), secondary (Engels et al., 2021; Gutman & Schoon, 2018), and university students (Benlahcene et al., 2022; Ketonen et al., 2019; You, 2016). These studies primarily rely on quantitative methodologies and use self-report questionnaires to understand the interplay of personal and contextual variables in student engagement. These studies mainly capture teaching practices, student behaviours, cognition, and emotion as antecedents and predictors of students' Engagement (Kahu, 2013). Recognizing that school engagement is a malleable construct due to its high responsiveness toward contextual factors (Appleton et al., 2008), it is meaningful to employ qualitative methods to obtain an in-depth understanding of this construct in the given context.

Context of the current study

Malaysia has continuously shown remarkable effort in enhancing the quality of early

childhood education in the country, reaffirming the value of preschool for the holistic development of children and their contributions in the future to the nation's growth. According to The Ministry of Education, Malaysia (2008) mandate, preschool is a setting in which stimulation of comprehensive child development is achievable if the child is allowed to develop necessary motor skills, be creative and analytical within their environment and embrace positive and righteous attitudes.

The Malaysian government's initiatives and efforts to enhance the quality of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) have proven successful, considering the increasing admission of preschoolers yearly. The Performance Management and Delivery Unit (Pemandu, 2015) has reported that the enrolment rate of preschoolers has escalated from 77% in June 2011 to 84.26% in December 2014 (Ministry of Education, 2013). To sustain this momentum, the government has also come up with plans and strategies that it believes will aid in enhancing the eminence of ECCE in Malaysia. These include ensuring all preschool teachers obtain a minimum diploma qualification in Early Childhood Education by the year 2020 and are expected to attain 100% enrollment for preschoolers in public or private preschools (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

The Malaysian ECCE is divided into two main categories, childcare centres (*'Taska'*) for children aged birth to 4 years old and preschools for children aged 4 to 6 years old (*'Tadika'*). Preschools in Malaysia are governed by both the public and private sectors. Malaysian preschool teachers are also required to attend pre-service and in-service training to enhance their skills and remain current on the knowledge and practices of the early education field. The public preschool teachers are trained under the Ministry of Education, while the private preschool teachers undergo training under The Malaysian Association of Kindergartens (PTM) organization. The PTM has developed a preschool skills training course to equip preschool teachers to meet the needs of the children and provide a solid foundation for the holistic development of preschool students.

Moreover, not only the government but the scholars in Malaysia are also showing interest in early-childhood education as there has been a significant amount of research on early childhood in Malaysia. Most of these studies are focused on examining preschool teachers' teaching competency, issues and challenges faced in early childhood education,

the implementation of the play-based approach, preschoolers' classroom climate, and also the role of the teacher in managing the classroom environment (Vijayan et al., 2016; Yong et al., 2015 Puteh & Ali, 2013).

However, there remains a scarcity of research examining preschoolers' Engagement in Malaysian classroom contexts. Therefore, the current utilizes Fredricks (2011) engagement model to examine preschool teachers' conception of preschoolers' engagement.

Method

The qualitative exploratory research approach was deemed suitable for achieving this study's objective as it helped acquire new insight and understanding of student engagement. Exploratory approaches go beyond descriptive approaches to find the underlying reasons or purposes for how or why the study phenomenon occurs (Yin, 2014).

Participants and Sampling

Seven preschool teachers participated in this study by sharing their perspectives and notion of conceptions of student engagement. The purposive sampling technique to recruit information-rich participants (Patton, 2002) was employed to recruit the participants. Teachers with a preschool teaching qualification and at least two years of work experience at a preschool level were selected. The participants came from three different private preschools in the Northern state of Malaysia-Kedah. All seven participants were local residents of the Northern state of Kedah in Malaysia. The selected private preschools were registered under the Ministry of Education (MOE) and implemented National Preschool Standard Curriculum. The number of students for each preschool was similar, within a range of 60 to 65 students. Malaysia is a multiracial society (Kaur et al., 2017), which is reflected in the teachers' sampling. Table 1 shows the participants' profiles.

Table 1. *Respondents' Profile*

Name	Age	Years in this Teaching	Gender	Position	Race	Years of Teaching
R1	27	3	F	Teacher	Malay	3
R2	25	4 ½	F	Teacher	Malay	4 ½
R3	36	3	F	Teacher	Malay	8
R4	30	8	F	Teacher	Indian	8
R5	42	12	F	Principal/ Teacher	Chinese	15
R6	27	2 ½	F	Teacher	Malay	2 ½
R7	29	1 ½	F	Teacher	Indian	1 ½

Ethical Statement

Prior to the interview, institutional permission and written informed consent of teacher participants were obtained. Confidentiality and privacy were promised in the agreement.

Bias

The research team for the present study comprises faculty members and a postgraduate student with major qualifications and teaching experiences in education and psychology.

Data Collection

Semi-structured face-to-face in-depth interviews were used to seek the conceptions and perspectives of the preschool teacher participants regarding their students' engagement. The interview sessions were conducted over five weeks, from mid-May to the end of June 2020. Teacher participants were interviewed during COVID-19 pandemic, the week of Movement Control Order (MCO), in which they were actively preparing lessons for online teaching. Accordingly, they were interviewed during their free period or lunch break to avoid disruption of lesson preparation. The interview sessions were held within the school building in areas such as the respective classrooms, canteen, and office, depending upon teacher participants' availability and comfort level.

Interviews were conducted in English and Malay, depending on the participants' language preferences. The interview sessions were audio-recorded to ensure all information shared by the teacher participants was transcribed verbatim. Each interview session lasted approximately thirty minutes to forty-five minutes. An interview protocol comprising a set

of open-ended questions was utilized. The protocol began with greetings, introductory questions, and the purpose of the study. Once the rapport was created between the participant and the researcher, primary questions were asked. The questions included, for example, what do you understand by the term engagement? How do you know when your students are engaged? What are some actions and behaviors of your students that indicate they are engaged and why? Several follow-up questions were asked when clarifications of more information were required.

Data Analysis

The interview data from all seven teachers were transcribed individually. The interviews that were conducted in the Malay language were translated and transcribed into English by the researcher. Member check with study participants was conducted. This ensured that the quality of data remained intact after the translation and transcription process. An inductive data analysis technique was applied (Marshall & Rossman, 2014) to analyze the data. In the first stage, which was a careful and engrossing reading and rereading of the transcript, the researchers read the transcript several times to gain a deep understanding of the data while taking initial notes or commenting on the research objective.

In the second stage, the researcher returned to the transcript and examined the initial notes or comments to be transformed into subthemes. During this stage, there was an active formulation of concise phrases which represented the subthemes. The construction of the concise phrases was essential in offering and demonstrating the conceptual understanding of the study phenomena (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

Subsequently, after obtaining several emerging subthemes in the third stage, the researcher then examined them thoroughly and clustered them based on their conceptual similarities. This whole process of categorizing the subthemes continued until the researchers decided to either combine, separate, or discard the subthemes based on a thorough and more in-depth analysis. Eventually, the finalized clusters were each specified under a descriptive label (main theme), indicating the conceptual essence of the subthemes in the particular clusters (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Table 2 shows the overall composition of the subthemes and themes of the present study, together with their codes.

Table 2. *Coding and Themes*

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
Behavioural Indicators	Responsiveness	Answer questions
		Share ideas
		Share opinions
		Giving feedback
		Able to communicate
		Ask questions
		Share their own experiences
	Participation and commitment	Join the activities
		Cooperate with each instruction
		Commitment in activities
		Involve voluntarily in activities
		Want to explore more
	Body Language	Take initiatives beyond classroom teaching and learning
		Sit readily/ upright
		Prepared for learning
		Focus
		Paying attention
Emotional Indicators	Positive Reactions	Eye contact
		Excited to answer questions
		Enthusiastic
		Impatient
		Show interest in learning
		Curious
		Look forward to the activities
	Positive Social Sense	Willingness to come to school
		Connection with friends

Findings

The inductive analysis of the data suggests teacher participants conceptualized preschool students' engagement primarily through behavioural and emotional indicators. When asked to share their notions of preschool students' engagement, their responses were inclined to describe preschoolers' overt behaviours. Therefore, the findings are presented under two main themes, behavioural and emotional indicators.

Theme 1 presents three subthemes - responsiveness, participation and commitment, and body language, while theme 2 has two subthemes- positive reactions and positive social sense.

Theme 1: Behavioural Indicators

The most common response by all seven teacher participants was focused on students' obvious and noticeable behaviors and actions as the indicator of student engagement. For several participants' the frequency and consistency of these behaviors and actions also mattered in defining the degree of preschoolers' engagement at school.

Responsiveness

All seven teacher participants agreed that preschoolers' responsiveness was one of the prominent behavioural indicators of preschoolers' engagement. To demonstrate students' responsiveness, teachers often relied on students' physical and mental alertness by frequently stating the terms "listens," "responds," "answers," and "speaks." Preschoolers' ability to actively answer questions in the classroom, usually by raising hands or speaking loudly, was a way to show their involvement and interest in the classroom activities. For example, R3 teacher participant stated, "When we ask questions, they raise hands or stand up to share their response. This indicates they are listening and enjoying the lesson". Teacher participants also believed that when preschoolers come forward and share their own stories or give opinions, they demonstrate their engagement in learning. R5 mentioned, for example, "When we ask something, they will tell from their own experience, what they see at home, what their parents do, so they will be very excited to tell their own stories." In addition, teachers also said that "When they ask questions, we know they are listening and engaged in what we teach." Some participants also expressed that mental and physical alertness demonstrated in child's behaviour is a strong indicator of students' engagement. For example, R3 said, "I stop in between and ask questions calling out random names; engaged students are often able to answer."

Commitment and effort

Five teacher participants' responses also revealed that engagement was closely linked to the degree of preschoolers' commitment and effort demonstrated in the class activities. One of the teacher participants (R4) also specified that engaged students will participate voluntarily and not by force. She quoted, "...when we ask them to come forward, some

students rush to join while others sit passively showing no interest". Teachers also believed that if students followed their instruction properly, for example, "They cooperate with each instruction the teacher gives means they are showing intention to work as required," they are engaged.

Besides, preschoolers who are committed to activities were also indicated as being engaged. According to the teacher participants, preschoolers' commitment was noticeable when they were ready to go the extra mile for their learning and not give up easily. For instance, the R3 teacher participant explained that "Sometimes they ask how to complete an exercise or workbook that their parents have bought" and "they work until the time is over and or teacher asks for the work back" (R1). Thus, the initiatives and persistence of the students reflect that they are eager to explore or investigate further what has been taught. In other words, their sense of inquisitiveness will lead them to want to know more about the topic. Participant R2 used an example to convey a similar opinion-

...while learning about animals, children usually know the sounds of animals, the physical features of the animals like which animals have fur but engaged children will investigate further, like which animals have stripes, and spots. So they highlight the differences between the animals.

Body language

Another subtheme of behavioural indicators of preschoolers' engagement was reported to be strongly associated with preschoolers' body language. Body language, commonly known as non-verbal communication, encompasses an individual's conscious and unconscious postures, gestures, and movements that convey related feelings or behaviours (Bambaeeroo & Shokrpour, 2017). Similarly, teacher participants of the present study stated that how preschoolers sit on the chairs was one of the many indicators of their engagement. For instance, the R5 teacher explained, "They sit properly on the chair and not sitting on two legs and rocking the chair; tell me how interested and attentive they are."

Moreover, almost all teacher participants were in agreement that preschoolers' eye contact was one of the gestures they considered to represent engagement. For instance, R6 teacher participant stated that-

While I speak, I also look into their eyes. Eye contact means that when you are in front of the class conducting activities, they will look at you. They'll see every action that the teacher makes in front of the class. They won't look outside, won't look at their friends, won't play with their fingers. So,

their eye contact will be fixed with the teacher from the beginning to the end.

Teacher participants further added that preschoolers get distracted very quickly, either by “looking around here and there” (R2) or even “fiddling with the things on their tables which include their pencils, eraser, pencil box and so on” (R4). Their response reflected that preschoolers’ body language was an important indication of preschoolers’ focus and attention in the classroom. R2 teacher participant mentioned that “preschoolers’ body language also conveys the feeling and behaviour that they are prepared for their learning.” She added, “their body language was evident in informing if they are ready, fully prepared with books and stationaries and looking forward to the lesson.” According to teachers, students concern and respect for the classroom also indicated their engagement. For example, R6 said, “If students remember class rules like where to put books, water bottles, and colours how to take turns, etc., he/she takes to school and its associated issues seriously.”

Theme 2: Emotional Indicators

The findings indicated that apart from behavioural indicators, teacher participants (also associated preschoolers’ engagement with their emotional reactions during the teaching and learning period. Preschoolers are young and use emotional reactions to express their feelings and experience. Thus it becomes a way for teachers to gauge students’ engagement.

Positive reactions

The interview responses reported that all seven teacher participants mentioned preschoolers’ emotions when asked about their conception of student engagement. For the respondents, students’ positive emotional reactions are a consistent indicator of their classroom engagement throughout their stay inside and outside of their classrooms. R2 teacher participant stated, “For example, when we start the lesson, we can see these kids are full of enthusiasm, excited. This is when we ask questions. They all are eager to answer, and all will raise their hands.” This was corroborated by R7 teacher participant who claimed, “The way they respond, the excitement to answer me back like loudly ‘teacher,

teacher I know I know.” So, the responses revealed that the excitement, enthusiasm and eagerness to respond were classified as an indicator of engagement of these preschoolers in the classroom. Teachers also added (R6) “Students sitting upright, showing happy hand gestures, clapping, watching or listening with surprise make them think this child is interested”.

A few teachers considered students “being impatient” while awaiting classroom activities to begin as a sign of eagerness and enthusiasm towards learning. For example, R2 said, “...my science activities, students cannot wait longer and keep insisting on beginning the activity, they get impatient if I take a bit longer”.

Positive social sense

A few teachers were also of the opinion that “smiles on students' faces” or their “happy mood- singing and dancing” indicated their connectedness with school, class, teachers, and peers. A teacher (R6) mentioned that “usually students who are reluctant to enter school, come to school crying show their dislike for school and learning.” While for other teachers, students' civic sense, disruptive behaviour, anger, throwing tantrums, or not getting along with peers were signals of their unwillingness to connect with the school. Teacher R1 said, “some students come to school in a bad mood, often fight and disrupt other students, which indicates their heart is not in the school.” Another teacher R4 said, “students show their unhappiness, sometimes by fighting with friends, not taking turns, and even destroying materials; I feel that the child does not want to be in the classroom.”

Discussion

The findings revealed preschool teachers' conceptions of preschoolers' engagement that were manifested in behavioural indicators and emotional reactions. The absence of cognitive engagement indicators in our findings does not come as a surprise. Cognitive engagement represents focused and higher-order mental activity (Sinatra et al., 2015), which can be best measured through participants' self-report or observation of complex tasks- all of which are challenging to achieve in a preschool setting. The traditional self-

report measures of cognitive engagement seek behaviours such as “makes a connection between complex constructs” or “reflects on understanding and changes the way to read materials” etc. (Fredricks , 2011). Given preschoolers’ cognitive development and the tasks they engage in, teachers in this study mainly relied on overt indicators of students’ engagement.

Regarding behavioural indicators, teacher participants’ responses focused on preschoolers’ observable/overt behaviours. The subthemes under this main theme were subsequently developed as teacher participants’ responses reflected that preschoolers’ engagement was evident when these learners showed active responses during discussions, participated voluntarily, and displayed high commitment and effort in all the activities conducted. They also elucidated that body language was also a significant indicator that conveyed the message of whether preschoolers were engaged or disengaged in the classroom.

The readiness of students to respond, their verbal participation and enthusiasm in the classroom discussion is also a common indicator of elementary school students’ engagement (Barkaoui et al., 2015). Similarly, commitment and effort demonstrated by preschool students are also regarded as similar to student engagement in elementary and tertiary education settings (Fredricks, 2011; Harris, 2011). Even in settings other than preschool, students volunteering and taking the initiative demonstrated that students enjoy and value their learning (Hariss, 2011). Teachers, in particular, were interested in highlighting preschoolers’ body language, which highlights their non-verbal communication such as their eye contact, facial expressions, and body posture as indicators of their engagement. The literature on non-verbal communication of young children also informs us that eye contact, hand gestures, and even head movements such as nodding were signs of conveying information related to their behaviours or feelings (Sönmez & Ceylan, 2016; Yoder et al., 2019). However, in the current study, a few indicators to measure this dimension for preschool students differed conceptually, reflecting the role that age plays in determining the form and manifestation of engagement and demonstrating how cultural orientation can shape the conceptualization of engagement.

Teachers in this study gave significant importance to students’ compliance with rules and regulations, such as the mention of the term “listens,” “raises hands to speak,” and

“cooperates with the instruction” to describe their conception of engagement. Similarly, in teachers’ expression of preschool students’ body language, “tight-upright positions”, “organized desk and chair,” and “absence of rocking in the chair” was considered evidence of students’ engagement. These expressions place more value on students’ physical engagement than mental engagement. Nevertheless, further probing into such responses revealed that each participant’s interpretation of these indicators was rooted in child development and cultural appropriation facts. For example, preschoolers’ short attention span and tendency to get easily distracted were attributed to more importance to eye contact and not looking outside of the classroom.

The second theme-emotional indicator, revealed that preschool teachers’ understanding of student engagement was also closely associated with preschoolers’ positive emotional expression and friendly social sense. Students’ positive affective responses such as excitement, enthusiasm, high interest, and curiosity during their learning, conveyed that they were highly engaged in classroom activities. Literature on preschoolers’ affective expressions and their interpretation informs that positive effects signify higher interest and enjoyment, which are strong indicators of student engagement (Harris, 2011; Sönmez & Ceylan, 2016). Similar expressions are also consistent with engagement measurement items of adult learners (Fredricks, 2011) in academic settings. Another surprising theme in the current study was students’ positive social sense which explained collegiality among students and peers through affective responses as an indicator of student engagement. According to the teachers, students’ willingness to respect and accept the classroom and its members manifested in their social behaviour. That amicable behaviour indicated their engagement at school. In general, students’ ‘good conduct’ is described as one of the indicators of behavioural engagement, including coming prepared to school, coming on time, etc. (Fredricks, 2011). However, the current themes focus more on appropriate social conduct as an indicator of emotional engagement since expression of aggression, disagreement, and non-compliance are generally discouraged in collective cultures and are the indicators of being a misfit in academic settings (Li et al., 2016).

Conclusion

The definitional debate on the construct of engagement, its indicators, and measurement is common in literature (Appleton et al., 2008). Given this construct's malleability, teachers conceptualize it based on their judgment, personal experiences, and interpretations (Barlow et al., 2020) that are heavily informed by their cultural orientations. The findings of this study have provided new, context-specific insights into the conceptualization of students' engagement in collectivist cultures. It is evident that teacher participants' conceptualizations of students' Engagement are grounded in their understanding of effective classroom and teaching techniques in a collectivist cultural context (Cai & Wang, 2010), which upholds respect, compliance, self-control, and self-control order in the classroom settings. Additionally, their conceptions of engagement are mapped on macro-level observation and completely ignore micro-level response time or attention allocation (Broughton et al., 2010). For example, a child sitting tight and upright, following teachers' instructions, following social norms, and yet be involved in the lesson.

Teachers' conception of their students' engagement has a direct implication for the instructional environment and design of classroom activities that would either be teacher-directed or seatwork-oriented (Varol, 2012). Through school policy in the Asian context, school leaders may also endeavour to revise an image of an ideal classroom to encourage teachers to transform their conception of an effective classroom and instruction. These findings can guide teacher education programs to orient teachers to negotiate between social and cultural values and the fundamentals of child development. The teacher training programs highlight that while classroom conduct is important for attention, conditions facilitating movement and free expression of creativity and emotions are also favourable for student learning and development (Cai & Liem, 2018). These findings can lend important insights for developing teacher training programs. This will engage students in ways that rely on free expression rather than conformity. The findings from the study also generate reconsideration for measuring the construct of students' Engagement in preschool settings.

Despite the significant implications, this study is not without its limitations. Future researchers could enlarge their study scope by obtaining the perspectives and notions of preschool teachers from a large and diverse population. It is suggested that future research

could integrate observation methods and incorporate students' and parents' perspectives in examining this construct. It will help represent a broader ecological perspective which, in turn, will complement the existing information. The final limitation concerns using caution in generalizing these findings to collectivist cultures. There are subcultures under the broad umbrella of collectivist cultures for which these conceptions of Engagement may vary.

References

- Appleton J. J., Christenson S. L., and Furlong M. J., (2008) Student engagement with school: Critical conceptual and methodological issues of the construct. *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(5), 369–386. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20303>
- Awang-Hashim, R., Kaur, A., & Noman, M. (2015). The interplay of socio-psychological factors on school engagement among early adolescents. *Journal of Adolescence*. 45, 214-224. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2015.10.001>
- Bakker, A. B., Vergel, A. I. S., & Kuntze, J. (2015). Student engagement and performance: A weekly diary study on the role of openness. *Motivation and Emotion*, 39(1), 49-62. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11031-014-9422-5>
- Bambaerero, F., & Shokrpour, N. (2017). The impact of the teachers' non-verbal communication on success in teaching. *Journal of Advances in Medical Education & Professionalism*, 5(2), 51-59. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/316233673_The_impact_of_the_teachers'_non-verbal_communication_on_success_in_teaching
- Barkaoui, K., Barrett, S. E., Samaroo, J., Dahya, N., Alidina, S., & James, C. (2015). Teachers' conceptions of student engagement in learning: The case of three urban schools. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 61(1), 80-99. <https://doi.org/10.11575/ajer.v61i1.56049>
- Barlow, Ryan F., "Transfer of Learning for K-12 STEM Teachers: From the GEAR UP Engineering Camp Professional Learning Experience to the Classroom" (2020). All Graduate Theses and Dissertations. 7978. <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd/7978>
- Benlahcene, A., Awang-Hashim, R., & Kaur, A. (2022). Perceived autonomy support and agentic engagement among Malaysian undergraduates: the mediatory role of personal

- best goals. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(1), 33-45.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1879743>
- Betts, L. R., & Rotenberg, K. J. (2007). A short form of the Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 25(2), 150-164.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0734282906296406>
- Birch, S. H., & Ladd, G. W. (1997). The teacher-child relationship and children's early school adjustment. *Journal of School Psychology*, 35(1), 61-79.
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0022-4405\(96\)00029-5](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0022-4405(96)00029-5)
- Broughton, S. H., Sinatra, G. M., & Reynolds, R. E. (2010). The nature of the refutation text effect: An investigation of attention allocation. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 103, 407-423. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220670903383101>
- Buhs, E. S., Koziol, N. A., Rudasill, K. M., & Crockett, L. J. (2018). Early temperament and middle school engagement: School social relationships as mediating processes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 110(3), 338-354.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/edu0000224>
- Cadima, J., Doumen, S., Verschueren, K., & Buyse, E. (2015). Child engagement in the transition to school: Contributions of self-regulation, teacher-child relationships and classroom climate. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 32, 1-12.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2015.01.008>
- Cai, E. Y. L., & Liem, G. A. D. (2017). 'Why do I study and what do I want to achieve by studying?' Understanding the reasons and the aims of student engagement. *School Psychology International*, 38(2), 131-148. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034316686399>
- Cai, J., & Wang, T. (2010). Conceptions of effective mathematics teaching within a cultural context: Perspectives of teachers from China and the United States. *Journal of Mathematics Teacher Education*, 13(3), 265-287.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10857-009-9132-1>
- Chen, X., Rubin, K. H., & Sun, Y. (1992). Social reputation and peer relationships in Chinese and Canadian children: A cross-cultural study. *Child Development*, 63(6), 1336-1343. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1992.tb01698.x>
- Chiu, T. K. (2021). Digital support for student engagement in blended learning based on self-determination theory. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 124, 1-10.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106909>

Dunstan, L., Hewitt, B., & Tomaszewski, W. (2017). Indigenous children's affective Engagement with school: The influence of socio-structural, subjective and relational factors. *Australian Journal of Education*, 61(3), 250-269.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944117732637>

Engels, M. C., Spilt, J., Denies, K., & Verschueren, K. (2021). The role of affective teacher-student relationships in adolescents' school engagement and achievement trajectories. *Learning and Instruction*, 75, 1-12.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.learninstruc.2021.101485>

Fredricks, J. A. (2011). Engagement in school and out-of-school contexts: A multidimensional view of Engagement. *Theory Into Practice*, 50(4), 327-335.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2011.607401>

Goble, P., Eggum-Wilkens, N. D., Bryce, C. I., Foster, S. A., Hanish, L. D., Martin, C. L., & Fabes, R. A. (2017). The transition from preschool to first grade: A transactional model of development. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 49, 55-67.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2017.01.007>

Gutman, L. M., & Schoon, I. (2018). Emotional Engagement, educational aspirations, and their association during secondary school. *Journal of Adolescence*, 67, 109-119.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2018.05.014>

Halliday, S. E., Calkins, S. D., & Leerkes, E. M. (2018). Measuring preschool learning engagement in the laboratory. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 167, 93-116.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2017.10.006>

Harris, L. (2011). Secondary teachers' conceptions of student engagement: Engagement in learning or in schooling?. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(2), 376-386.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2010.09.006>

Hartwell-Walker, M. (2016). *The Benefits of Play*. Retrieved from <https://psychcentral.com/lib/the-benefits-of-play>.

Hernández, M. M., Eisenberg, N., Valiente, C., Spinrad, T. L., Berger, R. H., VanSchyndel, S. K., & Southworth, J. (2018). Bidirectional associations between emotions and school adjustment. *Journal of Personality*, 86(5), 853-867.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jopy.12361>

- Kahu, E.R. (2013) Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38 (5), 758-773. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.598505>
- Kaur, A, (2020). Students as partners: Challenges and opportunities in Asia. *International Journal of Students as Partners*, 4(2), 145-149.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.15173/ij sap.v4i2.4366>
- Kaur, A., & Noman, M (2015). Exploring classroom practices in collectivist cultures through the lens of hofstede's model. *The Qualitative Report*, 20(11), 1794-1811.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2015.1090489>
- Kaur, A., & Noman, M. (2020). Investigating students' experiences of Students as Partners (SaP) for basic need fulfilment: A self-determination theory perspective. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 17(1). <http://dx.doi.org/10.53761/1.17.1.8>
- Kaur, A., Awang Hashim, R., & Noman, M. (2014). Teacher autonomy support: does it hinder motivation among Thai students? *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 11, 171-189. <http://dx.doi.org/10.32890/mjli.11.2014.7670>
- Kaur, A., Awang Hashim, R., & Noman, M. (2015). Teacher autonomy support intervention as a classroom practice in a Thai school-A self-determination theory perspective. *Journal for Multicultural Education*, 9(1), 10-27.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108 /JME-07-2014-0033>
- Kaur, A., Awang-Hashim, R, & Noman, M (2017). Defining intercultural education in the Malaysian context for social cohesion. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*. 19 (2), 44-60. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v19i2.1337>
- Ketonen, E. E., Malmberg, L. E., Salmela-Aro, K., Muukkonen, H., Tuominen, H., & Lonka, K. (2019). The role of study engagement in university students' daily experiences: A multilevel test of moderation. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 69, 196-205. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2018.11.001>
- Li, Y., Coplan, R. J., Archbell, K. A., Bullock, A., & Chen, L. (2016). Chinese kindergarten teachers' beliefs about young children's classroom social behavior. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 36, 122-132. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2015.10.008>
- Littlewood, W. (2001). Students' attitudes to classroom English learning: A cross-cultural study. *Language Teaching Research*, 5(1), 3-28.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/ 136216880100 500102>

- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2014). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Sage.
- Ministry of Education Malaysia. (2008). *Education for all Mid-decade Assessment Report 2000–2007 Reaching the Unreached*. Ministry of Education Malaysia.
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000221790>
- Ministry of Education. (2013). *Malaysia education blueprint 2013 - 2025 (Preschool to post-secondary education)*. Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia.
<https://www.pmo.gov.my/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Malaysia-Education-Blueprint-2013-2025.pdf>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Pemandu. (2015). *Government transformation programme: 2014 annual report*. Retrieved from http://www.pemandu.gov.my/gtp/upload/Eng_GTP2014_AR_Full.pdf
- Pianta, R.C., Howes, C., Burchinal, M., Bryant, D., Clifford, R., Early, C., Barbarin, O. (2005). Features of pre-kindergarten programs, classrooms, and teachers: Do they predict observed classroom quality and child-teacher interactions? *Applied Developmental Science*, 9, 144-159. http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s1532480xads0903_2
- Puteh, S. N., & Ali, A. (2013). Preschool teachers' perceptions towards the use of play-based approach in language and literacy development for preschool. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 10, 79-98.
<https://doi.org/10.32890/mjli.10.2013.7652>
- Reeve, J., & Tseng, C. M. (2011). Agency as a fourth aspect of students' Engagement during learning activities. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 36(4), 257-267.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2011.05.002>
- Sabol, T. J., Bohlmann, N. L., & Downer, J. T. (2018). Low-Income Ethnically Diverse Children's Engagement as a Predictor of School Readiness Above Preschool Classroom Quality. *Child Development*, 89(2), 556-576.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12832>
- Salanova, M., Schaufeli, W., Martinez, I., & Bresó, E. (2010). How obstacles and facilitators predict academic performance: the mediating role of study burnout and Engagement. *Anxiety, Stress, and Coping*, 23, 53-70.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10615800802609965>
- Sinatra, G. M., Heddy, B. C., & Lombardi, D. (2015). The challenges of defining and

- measuring student engagement in science. *Educational Psychologist*, 50(1), 1-13.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2014.1002924>
- Sönmez, S., & Ceylan, B. (2017). Teachers' perceptions of well-being and involvement in preschool children. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(1), 35-44.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1150272>
- Trowler, V. (2010). Student engagement literature review. *The Higher Education Academy*, 11(1), 1-15.
- Varol, F. (2013). What they believe and what they do. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 21(4), 541-552.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2012.677309>
- Vijayan, P., Chakravarthi, S., & Philips, J. A. (2016). The role of teachers' behaviour and strategies in managing a classroom environment. *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 6(3), 208-215. <https://doi.org/10.7763/IJSSH.2016.V6.644>
- Vitiello, V. E., Booren, L. M., Downer, J. T., & Williford, A. P. (2012). Variation in children's classroom engagement throughout a day in preschool: Relations to classroom and child factors. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27(2), 210-220.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2011.08.005>
- Wang, M. T., & Fredricks, J. A. (2014). The reciprocal links between school engagement, youth problem behaviors, and school dropout during adolescence. *Child Development*, 85(2), 722-737. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12138>
- Wigfield, A., & Guthrie, J. T. (2000). Engagement and motivation in reading. *Handbook of Reading Research*, 3, 403-422.
- Williford, A. P., Maier, M. F., Downer, J. T., Pianta, R. C., & Howes, C. (2013). Understanding how children's Engagement and teachers' interactions combine to predict school readiness. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 34(6), 299-309. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2013.05.002>
- Yang, M.-Y., Chen, Z., Rhodes, J. L. F., & Orooji, M. (2018). A longitudinal study on risk factors of grade retention among elementary school students using a multilevel analysis: Focusing on material hardship and lack of school engagement. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 88, 25-32. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2018.02.043>
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: designs and methods*. Sage.

- Yoder, M. L., Williford, A. P., & Vitiello, V. E. (2019). Observed quality of classroom peer engagement in a sample of preschoolers displaying disruptive behaviors. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 47, 206-217.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.12.011>
- Yong, M., Daud, K., & Rahman, A. A. (2015). Competence of preservice preschool teachers at teacher education institute of Malaysia. *International Educative Research Foundation and Publisher*, 3(5), 46-57. <https://doi.org/10.31686/ijer.vol3.iss5.357>
- You, J. W. (2016). The relationship among college students' psychological capital, learning empowerment, and Engagement. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 49, 17-24.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2016.05.001>