

Study of long-term student engagement challenges 'one great teacher' narrative of education

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A positive relationship with a teacher at an early age may help children to feel more engaged with school, but not necessarily in the long term,

new research shows.

The finding comes from a University of Cambridge study of more than 3,600 young people in Australia, using data gathered at several points between the ages of 8 and 15. The students' levels of school engagement—meaning their interest in school and willingness to learn—fluctuated during this period, especially during the pivotal transition from primary to [secondary education](#).

While depictions of teaching in popular culture sometimes imply that one teacher can transform a student's school career, the results of the study suggest that student engagement patterns are more nuanced and are likely to require a sustained and collective effort to build positive relationships both between teachers and students, and students and their peers.

The study found that any long-term effects of students having a strong relationship with their teacher early in primary school were, at best, slight. Conversely, the finding implies that every teacher can potentially make a positive difference to a student's commitment and sense of well-being in school, regardless of how disengaged they may have felt in the past because that engagement is constantly prone to change.

The study was led by Ioannis Katsantonis, a doctoral researcher at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.

"Even if a teacher works incredibly hard to help a child in primary school, that does not necessarily mean that five or 10 years later, you are going to find a student who is settled, happy, and committed to learning," he said. "Some aspects of student engagement do remain stable but there is also a large amount of fluctuation. This is particularly true during the primary to secondary transition."

Relatively few studies have explored how student engagement develops during early adolescence. [Some of those which have](#), however, suggest that in the first years of secondary school, student engagement levels often decline.

The Cambridge study sought to understand more about how these engagement patterns change. It also examined how far they are linked both to students' earlier interactions with teachers at primary school and their sense of 'belonging' in secondary school: how far they feel accepted, included, and respected by teachers and classmates alike.

The data for the study came from a sample of 3,643 participants in the '[Growing up in Australia](#)' study, a long-term project which is following the development of thousands of people born in Australia between March 1999 and February 2000.

This includes survey-based information about the participants' school engagement levels, gathered both when they were aged 10/11, at the end of [primary school](#), and when they were 12/13, at the start of secondary school. It also contains measures of school belonging at age 12/13 and information from teacher surveys, measuring the strength of their relationships with the same students at an earlier stage, when they were eight or nine.

In addition, the researchers examined whether engagement affects later [academic achievement](#), using the scores in the Australian National Assessment Programme—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests, taken when the students were 14/15.

Overall, the researcher found that between ages 10/11 years and 12/13 years, the students could be clustered into three fairly clear groupings: those who were "mostly disengaged," those who seemed "moderately engaged," and those who were "highly engaged." A substantial

proportion, 15%, were mostly disengaged at age 10/11, and this rose slightly to 18% as they started secondary school. Boys were more likely to be in this group than girls.

More surprisingly, however, many students transitioned to different groups between the two time points. About 43% of students who were mostly disengaged at age 10/11 changed groups by the time they were 12/13; 34% of the moderately engaged group and 49% of the highly engaged students also switched categories. This shows that engagement fluctuates considerably between primary and secondary school.

There was no evidence that any significant positive effects on engagement deriving from students having a strong bond with their [teacher](#) at age eight or nine persisted as they got older. In fact, the study found this had no impact on [student](#) engagement at age 10/11 and only a very weak effect on preventing disengagement at age 12/13.

A sense of general belonging within the school community at age 12/13 was strongly linked to higher engagement at the same age, however. In other words, when students feel that they are respected and valued not just by their teachers but also by their peers, they are more likely to show greater positivity and commitment.

The study also provides some evidence that students who feel more engaged at the start of secondary school experience long-term academic benefits. Those who fell into the moderately or highly engaged categories at age 12/13 generally performed better in standardized numeracy, writing, and spelling tests two years later.

This relationship between engagement and academic outcomes points to the need to ensure that the relational 'school climate'—an umbrella term referring to the respect, values, and relationships that define students' experiences at school—is consistently positive and inclusive, Katsantonis

said.

"One of the most important things to grasp about young people's [school engagement](#) is that continuity is not guaranteed," he added. "Teachers matter significantly to children, but they do so at every stage. Continual and consistent attention to the school environment is vital."

The findings are reported in the journal, *Australian Educational Researcher*.

More information: I belong; hence, I engage? A cohort study of transitions between school engagement classes and academic achievement: The role of relational school climate, *Australian Educational Researcher* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s13384-024-00698-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-024-00698-0)

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