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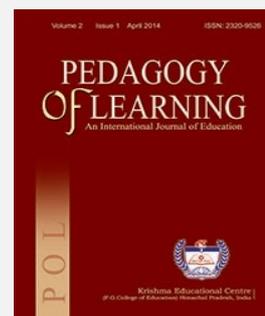
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## Perception about Engagement of Students Enrolled through Lateral Entry: Voices of Teachers and Students

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**ABSTRACT**

The paradigm shift of viewing students as active participants in learning has brought the need to not only understand how they learn but also to understand various factors that play a significant mediating role in aiding students to become ‘active participants’ in their learning process. Students’ engagement in this direction is an important construct. It is considered as a meta-construct which includes multiple dimensions namely - affective (emotional), behavioural and cognitive dimensions. With ‘Education for All’ as the vision and mission where ‘all’ children have access to and opportunity for completion of elementary education, the importance of making the learning environment adequately engaging has gained further prominence. Thus effectively engaging ‘at-risk’ students with school requires teachers to actively create conditions that foster a feeling of being connected with the students. The present paper focuses upon understanding the perception of teachers towards such ‘at risk’ students. The paper has implications on creating engaging school and classroom environment for ‘at-risk’ students, policy level implication in school education and in teacher preparation.

**Keywords:** Student’s engagement, perception of teachers, perception of ‘at-risk’ students, age-appropriate enrolled students, Right to Education Act (2009)

**INTRODUCTION**

The radical shift of viewing students as individuals who are capable of constructing her/his knowledge was recognized few decades back with the social constructivist approach (Vygotsky et al, 1978) gaining prominence and relevance in the diverse socio-cultural milieu of society. With this shift there came a change in viewing transaction in the classroom and the role of teachers as a facilitator in students’ learning process. It also brought to foreground the perspective that what students learn is

outcome of their engagement with the world around them, where they explore, respond and make meaning of the objects, situations, social and inter-personal interactions etc. This shift entailed the process to become focus of learning in which a student is involved, thus making the student an active participant in the learning process instead of a passive recipient of instructions and directions. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF, 2005) has also visioned this paradigm and encouraged the student in school/classroom to be perceived as an active partner in the process of learning and hence a dynamic participant in the construction of her/his knowledge. Learning indicators too shifted to assessing students' mastery across cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains, thus putting emphasis on overall development of students.

This paradigm shift of viewing the student as an active participant brought the need to not only understand how they learn but also made it crucial to understand various factors that may play a significant mediating role in aiding students to become 'active participants' in their learning process. In this backdrop students' engagement, as a construct, gained much importance. Researches have indicated that students' engagement has both short-term and long-term influences on students' academic and social-personal life. It has been found to have impact on students' involvement with learning, academic performance as well as their behaviour/conduct in school. In the long-term it has been linked to various life outcomes, such as self-esteem, adapting socially appropriate behaviour etc. it is also considered as a preventive factor against school dropout, indulgence in substance abuse, engaging in peer victimization activities etc. in other words student engagement not only is influential to students' performance and adaptation to their life in school but also has pivotal role in their developmental and adjustment patterns in life beyond school.

Student engagement has been considered as a meta-construct which included multiple dimensions of involvement in school and making efforts towards learning (Appleton et al, 2008; Fredricks et al, 2004). While most researchers have mentioned about three-part typology and conceptualized student engagement as affective (emotional), behavioural and cognitive dimensions (Lau et al, 2009; Fredricks et al, 2004; Jimerson et al, 2003). There are also many researchers who conceptualize it with an additional (fourth) dimension – academic engagement (Appleton et al, 2008).

Students' performance in their academic life is not only a concern for the adults (particularly parents and teachers) involved in their academic life but are also significant partners in their learning. Connor (2011) considered engagement of students as 'malleable' since it was found that these partners in students' learning have pivotal role in influencing students' engagement. The social context and interactions with these partners in learning have been proven to have immense effect on students' readiness and ability to engage with various activities in their academic life in school. Classroom is a primary micro context in which students and teachers interact. From earliest years of schooling, researchers have found that students who have greater emotional bond with their teacher are more engaged with learning (Hamre and Pinta, 2001; Birch and Ladd, 1997; Wentzel, 1997). In this process of students' engagement, the adults, particularly the experienced members of school (i.e. teachers) play a significant role in facilitating learners' identification, participation and involvement with academic as well as non-academic activities of school.

Students spend a considerable time in school, of which the classroom is one of the most influential setting due to its capability of holding transactions and building and maintaining of relations between students and teacher-students. Relationship between teacher and students reflect a classroom's capacity to encourage development and is the key to understanding engagement among students (Pinta *et al*, 2012). Teacher-student interactions have been proven to have considerable influence on student engagement (Burgess, 2015; Jensen, 2013). Reyes *et al* (2012) in their research pointed that supportive teachers who created a positive emotional climate for learning demonstrated to

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their students that the classroom was a safe place and that they were enthusiastic about the students' learning. This resulted in students feeling connected with their teacher and invested more in learning. Guvene (2015) highlighted that students who believed that their teachers accepted them and believed that they were 'valuable', felt more comfortable and happy to be in class, participated more in classroom transactions and were involved themselves in all classroom activities.

The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act (RTE), 2009 by Government of India has made provision ensuring 'Education For All' by stating that all children within the age of six to fourteen years will have the right to free and compulsory education till the completion of their elementary education. The Act has also clearly stated that such children who either could not enroll when they were of age six or for some reason could not continue to be in school, will be admitted in the class appropriate to their age and will also have the right to receive special training so that they are at par with their classmates. This provision of the Act ensures that every child not only has access to elementary education but also receives every support to complete their elementary education. The provision of the Act also extends adequate challenge for schools to provide appropriate enabling and conducive environment to all its students such that it motivates every children in the school system to complete their education. To bring the reenrolled/never enrolled students at par with their classmates, academically and psychologically is of utmost importance in order to facilitate their '*pursuing and completing of elementary education on any grounds*' (RTE, chap III, sec8 (c)). Besides the extrinsic support through special training provision, it is necessary to ensure that such students feel engaged with their school and with learning (Chakraborty, 2016)

Engaging such 'at-risk' students with school requires teachers and the school administration to actively create conditions that foster a feeling of being connected. Relationships between students and adults in schools, and among students themselves, are a critical factor of student engagement, this is especially true for students considered to be at-risk and without other positive adult interaction. A sense of academic competence is fostered in relationships with adults as the important sources of academic resiliency. Opportunities to develop social and emotional skills (e.g. emotional regulation and positive attitudes and beliefs go a long way in facilitating engagement with school.

Another area of research involving students' affective or emotional engagement is the perceived level of school warmth and academic achievement and how they impact identification with school (Voelkl, 1997). Students' sense of relatedness was examined to understand its role in engagement and academic performance (Furrer and Skinner, 2003). The results revealed that both student and teachers reported levels of students' behavioural and emotional engagement to mediate significantly the relationship between relatedness and academic performance.

Teachers' behaviour influences students' perception of their interaction with teachers (Skinner and Belmont, 1993). Their research showed that teachers' liking is communicated to children and has pervasive effects on the way in which students experience their interaction with teachers. When teachers are less involved with students, students not only miss the involvement but also experience teachers as less consistent and more coercive. Children engagement in learning activities is influenced both by perception of teachers and directly by teachers' actual behaviour (Skinner and Belmont, 1993). An important indicator of student-teacher relationship is the teachers' evaluation of and their educational expectations from their students, particularly the 'at-risk' students. The teachers' perception and evaluation of students' learning capacity and behavior may impact how teachers interact with students in the classroom (Hauser-Cram, Sirin, and Stipek 2003).

Although not much work focusing on student engagement as a determinant of students' learning has been done in the Indian scenario, a Primary Education Enhancement Project (Kulkarni, 2007) addresses the major challenges to increase participation and retention of all children up to the

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age of 14 years, the project reports have shown that increased participation reduces drop out rate. A study conducted on “the reasons of urban deprived children repeatedly becoming out of school even after their mainstreaming in the regular schooling system” in Raipur district, Chhatisgarh have revealed increase in personal and peer factors for leaving the school, working for livelihood, demotivating home environment, working for family and overage, discriminatory behaviour, indiscipline in the school, scarcity of teachers , abusive family relations, teaching facilities & encouragement, fear of teachers and distance of school increase the probability of dropout

Against this background the present paper attempts to develop an understanding of teachers’ perspective towards students enrolled through lateral entry in the school.

### ENQUIRY AND DATA COLLECTION

Data collection was guided by questions to teachers regarding their perception towards the lateral entry students enrolled in the school. Attempt was also made to understand factors that influence/impede students’ engagement.

The study was carried out in two states (Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh). In Uttarakhand the districts of Udham Singh Nagar and Nainital were focused in the study while it was Khargone and Dhar districts in Madhya Pradesh. The samples of the study (students and teachers) were from Class III to VIII in Government boys and girls schools from semi-urban/rural areas of the districts mentioned. Students who were part of this study were those who were enrolled under age-appropriate admission provision of RTE Act, 2009. Sample distribution was as follows –

**Table-1: Distribution of Sample Student Population**

Uttarakhand (140)					Madhya Pradesh (240)					Total (380)
Udham Singh Nagar (95)			Nainital (45)		Dhar (80)		Khargone (160)			
3 <sup>rd</sup> grade	10		3		7		17		37	
	M7	F3	M3	F0	M6	F2	M2	F15		
4 <sup>th</sup> grade	20		12		30		38		100	
	M8	F12	M6	F6	M12	F18	M13	F25		
5 <sup>th</sup> grade	25		15		9		29		78	
	M6	F19	M3	F12	M4	F5	M12	F17		
6 <sup>th</sup> grade	28		10		26		55		119	
	M5	F23	M3	F7	M7	F18	M32	F23		
7 <sup>th</sup> grade	10		5		5		16		36	
	M4	F6	M2	F3	M3	F2	M5	F11		
8 <sup>th</sup> grade	2		0		3		5		10	
	M0	F2	M0	F0	M1	F2	M3	F2		
M = 30 F = 65		M = 17 F = 28		M = 33 F = 47		M = 67 F = 93		M = 147 F = 233		

**Table-2: Distribution of Sample Teacher Population**

Uttarakhand (28)				Madhya Pradesh (43)				Total (71)	
Udhamsingh Nagar (21)		Nainital (7)		Dhar (16)		Khargone (27)			
Primary	14		4		10		15		43
	M3	F11	M0	F4	M3	F7	M5	F10	
Middle	20		12		30		38		28
	M2	F5	M1	F2	M2	F4	M5	F7	
M = 5 F = 16		M = 1 F = 6		M = 5 F = 11		M = 10 F = 17		M = 21 F = 50	

## EXPERIENCES IN THE FIELD

Responses from teachers and students underwent thematic analysis which revealed the following findings:-

### a) *Voices of Teachers' Towards the Lateral Entry Students*

In both Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh teachers responses revealed that they perceived the age appropriate entry to school provision under RTE Act as a blessing. According to them the Act made opportunity for such students who had to drop out because of various reasons and could not enroll in school earlier. In Uttarakhand majority of teachers (80%) perceived that their students are interested in coming to school. They also believed that if the students come to school regularly then they can perform very well in academics. However in Madhya Pradesh many teachers (53%) though appreciated the systemic efforts made under RTE Act by school believed that it was tough for 'these' students to achieve academically as they have no proper background "pehle kabhi pade nahi hai, ghar par suvidha nahi, bohot mushkil hai".

According to the teachers in Uttarakhand most of the target population showed interest in studies, while some needed more time than regular students in understanding concepts but majority were at par with 'regular students'. It was also reported that most students participated in group activities in classroom also other school activities. In Madhya Pradesh teachers perceived that it was hard for the target population to come and be regular at school as their priorities are different. Teachers' responses revealed that they felt that their students gave priority to their family work, economic production like working on fields, feeding animals etc. They also shared that due to poor/no academic background of family members it was difficult to teach the students, as their parents or elders were not able to check homework and support the students, when they studied at home. The teachers (65%) perceived that illiteracy of the family was one of the major obstacle for such students. "Bahut mehnat karni padthi hai, kyunki ghar par koi sahyog nahi mil pata or ghar par yeh kaam karte hai".

Teachers both in Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh perceived that there were many students who want to be regular in school but due to family problems/responsibilities they were unable to attend school on a regular basis. Teachers responses revealed that majority of them (90%) understood why it was difficult for such students to attend school regularly – their focus was more on earning and survival, almost all come from economically weaker sections, so they have to look after their house and younger siblings as both parents' go to work as daily wage laborers.

The responses from most teachers revealed that they believed that education can bring a positive change in these students' lives. "ghar per rehte to sirf ghar ka kaam aur khete hai, yaha school aane sey bohot kuch naya sikhte hai.." "school gives opportunity for them to learn painting,

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sewing, computers, meet and make new friends etc.” Teachers perceived that in school students learn to be neat and clean, learn good manners and appropriate communication skills. Teachers in both the states believed that it was necessary to make parents partners in their children’s learning by making them aware and encouraging them to become proactive in their children’s education. Few teachers (22%), particularly in Rudrapur, Haldwani (in Uttarakhand) and Jhirniya, Bhagwanpur (Madhya Pradesh) reported that there were few parents who understood the importance of studying and receiving education, came to school on their own to know how their child was doing in her/his studies, whether she/he was regular in attending school etc. However, majority of teachers (88%) perceived that parents were not aware and neither were bothered about their children’s progress in school and in learnings. According to them, most of the parents were more worried about survival of themselves and the family and focused on fulfilling the basic needs of the family *‘unkey liye do waqt ki roti mil jaye purey parivaar ko, isi per sara dhyan rehta hai...bachhi ko school mey bharti kar diya, wohi bohot hai.’*

#### **b) Factors that Influenced/Impeded Engagement of Students**

The responses of students on their perception about their teachers, their own psychological needs, why they participated in school/classroom activities, what they liked/disliked doing in school etc. revealed the factors that facilitated or hampered their engagement with their school. Also responses from teachers during interaction with them elicited not only their perceptions and beliefs about the sample population but also their readiness to facilitate their students to engage with learning and other activities of the school. This too reflected the factors that facilitated /impeded the students’ engagement with their school.

Analysis of the responses of students and teachers revealed that factors that facilitated the engagement of students were mainly, an amicable relation with their teachers, classmates and peers in school, being made to feel competent and efficacious about self as a student and also as a human being by teachers, made to feel ‘useful’ as a student to peers/classmates, teachers while in school, the presence of teachers in class as a compassionate but authority figure, teachers as knowledge providers, and caring and collaboration amongst peers for academic activities. The feeling of belongingness with teachers, peers and the stuff of school was a recurring factor which emerged as a facilitating factor of engagement across students of all grades and gender both in Uttarakhand and Madhya Pradesh. Teacher’s cooperative behavior, both verbal as well as non-verbal, was also identified as a motivating factor for students.

An analysis of the strategies adopted by teachers which helped students to perceive them as ‘caring’, supportive and understanding was undertaken. Based on the responses of teachers on what do they do to help their students to understand the lessons, what did they do to help the students to come to school, what do they do to encourage them to participate in classroom transactions, do they meet their parents etc. it was found that some of the teachers participated in student’s counting and went from village to village identifying children who were either dropout, noting down their names and encouraging their parents to enroll them in schools. It was informed by students that there were few teachers who went out on their own to the nearby slums/villages and ‘found out’ children and got them admitted in school. Interacting with such teachers it was revealed that this effort on the part of the teachers facilitated them to become familiar faces for the sample even before they re-entered school. This familiarity with the students’ home environment, parents and siblings and the students themselves was a strategy which the teachers reported they found very useful. It was also shared that these teachers ensured that the ‘familiarity and understanding’ between them and their students continued even after the students were readmitted in the school. The teachers shared that this

understanding helped them to be empathetic and compassionate with the students and also appreciate the efforts made by them in studies.

Knowledge of the constraints at home for studying by the sample helped the teachers make additional effort to assist students in understanding the lessons. This was understood from such responses of the teachers as – ‘in the classroom if a child did not understand anything, repeated it 2-3 times’ and some even called the child aside (either in the classroom itself, during the class period or after the class period) and gave additional inputs as well as encouragement. This strategy of teachers was also shared by students as well, when they were asked why did they like their teacher. Few teachers reported that sometimes they need to give separate work from regular students or make the students sit in front row to ensure that they are not only paying attention in classroom activities but also understanding the lessons being taught. Taking help of TLM and charts etc was observed to be a regular practice by the teachers for helping students to understand and clarify lessons.

Another strategy that was reported both by teachers and the students was prior to asking questions the teacher gave about 5-10 minutes for revising the chapter that was taught the previous day and on which the teacher was to ask questions to the class. This ensured that all the students irrespective of whether one had studied at home or not did get an opportunity to study the chapter. For the students it reflected that their teacher indeed had an understanding of their limitations at home and also that she/he (teacher) was keen to help them (students) learn and perform well in class as well in studies. Infact this strategy of teachers was shared by the students during the interview with them, rather than by the teachers. However, when it was a recurrent response from many students across different schools, the teachers were enquired about it. They confirmed that it was practiced by them as they genuinely felt that ‘sare bachhey achhey se padh saktey hai, agar unko mauka diya jaye. In bachho ko ghar mey kaha time milta hai, aur nahi mahaul hota hai, ki woh maan laga ke padhey... is liye class mey peheley thoda time padhney ke liye/revise karne ke liye dete hai’.

Teachers’ flexible questioning pattern in class was also revealed as a strategy adopted by the teachers who were liked by the students. During the interview with such teachers it was shared by them that they sometimes asked a question to the entire class as ‘just left the question in the air’ for anyone/all to answer the question, sometimes they asked a question and then urged those who know the reply and ‘who is willing to answer to raise her/his hand’, while at other times they asked a particular student and ‘called out her/his name’, and waited for that student to answer. As reported by the students the fact that madam/sir can ask anyone, urged them to come prepared to her/his class and the uncertainty of ‘*aaj madam/sir sabko puchenge ya haath uthaney ke liye bolenge, ya naam leke boleenge jawaab dene ke liye*’ was liked very much by the students as it challenged them and it made them ‘happy’ when they were able to answer correctly to such a teachers’ questioning.

Some of the factors that caused impediments in students engaging with their school were their perceived poor conduct by their peers, using foul language not only by peers/classmates but also by teachers, feelings of being isolated in class/playground etc. by teachers and by classmates, lack of appreciation of efforts made by the students, perceived lack of understanding of their family/home conditions by teachers, not being able to comprehend the subject matter being taught even though the students made sincere efforts and having to spend time in such classes where there was ‘free-time’ amongst students (due to shortage of teachers). It was during such ‘free-time’ classes that students took opportunity to quarrel and fight with each other. Students perceiving their teachers and peers as ones who do not like them were another factor to keep them away from engaging in school. Such behaviour as shouting on them, making faces or not involving them were some ways through which students felt that their teachers and peers did not like them and they felt hurt.

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Interacting with teachers also revealed that few teachers perceived that no matter whatever their (students') home condition they need to study at home as 'ghar ka kaam ghar per hee karke aana chahiye'. 'Agar hum class me unko padhney ka time dengey, toh hum kaab padhayenge?'. Also when enquired what did they do to initiate interaction in class, few teachers replied that after they had asked a question they usually asked such students to raise their hand 'agar jawaab jaanta ho' and then amongst those who 'raised hand' they asked to answer. When feelings of students about such interaction in classroom was sought, they responded that they often 'hesitate' to answer in such situations as 'kya pata mujhe sahi uttar ata bhi ya nahi' and waited for some classmate/teacher to tell the right answer.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL EDUCATION

The findings have implications for enhancing students engagement with school and learning and thus help to complete their elementary education.

- i. Overall the study highlights that the engagement of lateral entry students with school is a collaborative endeavour between teachers and students as a team. This would have implications for designing interventions for engaging the targeted population by including strategies on fulfilling the psychological needs with an understanding of how the population perceive their teachers, peers as well as themselves as effective stakeholders.
- ii. The systemic provision of providing special training to bridge the academic gaps and become at par with their classmates (RTE Act, 2009) may ensure their behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement.
- iii. The findings of the study may also help the schools to create an environment conducive for the active involvement and participation of these students with all activities of school.
- iv. In teacher preparation also the findings of the study may help by incorporating caring concerns in the teacher training curriculum.

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