# An Exploratory Study on Students' Engagement in Social Studies of Year 7

Zolkernain Ishak

Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Education, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Jalan Tungku Link, BE1410, Brunei Darussalam

Tel: 6732463001      E-mail: yusimah.amjah@ubd.edu.bn


Dk Yusimah Pg Hj Amjah (Corresponding author)

Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah Institute of Education, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Jalan Tungku Link, BE1410, Brunei Darussalam

Tel: 6732463001      E-mail: yusimah.amjah@ubd.edu.bn

## Abstract

There is lack of student engagement noticeably among secondary schools. Willms, Friesen, & Milton (2009), studied that disengagement typically becomes a concern in middle school and high school. The study involved student engagement in the classroom, with three specific interests firstly, to look at the perception of teachers on student engagement, where teachers conceptualized student engagement as only behavioral dimension and both agreed that cultural context is a factor in student learning. Secondly, to look at the degree students exhibiting engaging behaviors and thirdly, to explore the factors that affect student engagement. From the analysis, students did exhibit engagement as they were engaged to do the activity (behavioral engagement) and excited to do a group work (affective engagement). Positive body language, consistence focus, verbal participation, student confidence, fun and excitement play deterministic roles in conceptualizing students' level of engagement. Hopefully, the study will generate outcome that are beneficial to teachers to be aware on the importance of engaging students in learning especially in Social Studies.

**Keywords**: Student engagement, Student learning, Behaviours, Social Studies

# 1. Introduction

The main purpose of this study is to develop or create interest and desire in learning Social Studies hence, to increase the level of engagement amongst students in Year 7 taking Social Studies. In order to do so, this study will attempt to explore the perception of teachers on student engagement, to investigate at the factors that influence or affect student engagement from the perspective of the students. We need to develop and create interest among students so that they can engage fully in their learning in order to increase student learning and achievement. There is lack of student engagement noticeably among secondary school. Willms, Friesen, & Milton (2009), studied that disengagement typically becomes a concern in middle school and high school. It can be a struggle to make students to engage more in their learning as students have changed over the last twenty years, perhaps as a result of their upbringing in technological rich society. They appear to have different needs, goals, and learning preferences than students in the past. To enable students to fully engage in learning, teachers must understand their learning needs and learning preferences. Based on own observation, students are easily attracted to gadgets, technologies and social network such as iPad, Facebook, Twitter and others. This is why educators and other stakeholders have tried to incorporate over the past years those technologies and social network into education so that our students will be more engage and increase their interest in learning. Brunei 21st Century National Education System (SPN 21) was aim to improve students' success rates and specifically aims to develop 21st century skills, and to fulfill the needs and challenges to develop the country. Students as future leaders must possess the relevant knowledge and skills, as well as the right values and attitudes in order to meet the changing needs of the society of the future (UNESCO-IBE, 2011).

When the activities are challenging and interesting, students exhibit fun and joy, hence engage in the activities. On some rare occasion in the class, I had a "good" level of student engagement as there is evidence from the students that they are listening to the lesson; engage in conversation with me and their peers in doing the activities. However it was rare to find majority of the students exhibiting that behaviors. Thats why this study was conducted as to understand and make relevant on the importance of engaging students, and as students' participation in class increases, we can predict that student learning and achievement would also increase. It is important for subject like Social Studies require students to have prior knowledge to build so that they able to have better learning skills. Hence, student engagement is a necessary element of every single day of a student's education.

## 1.1 Research Questions

This study was examined at student engagement based on the following three research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of teachers on student engagement?
2. To what degree students are exhibiting engaging behaviors?
3. What are the factors that affect student engagement?

## 1.1.1 Literature Review

In order to determine students exhibition of engaging behaviors, it is utmost important to properly conceptualize the term student engagement by looking at previous literatures for that definition or dimension of engagement. Connell (1990), included emotional or affective aspect to conceptualized engagement. This includes feeling of belonging, enjoyment, and attachment. Recent studies also include cognitive as another aspect of engagement such as students' investment in learning, perseverance in the face of challenges, and use of deep rather than superficial strategies (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004). Whereas, Willms (2003) stated student engagement is used to discuss students' attitudes towards school. The term student engagement has been used to depict students' willingness to participate in routine school activities, such as attending classes, submitting required work, and following teachers' directions in class (Chapman 2003). Students that can engage effectively in their learning can lead to better achievement. Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck & Connell (1998) stated that engagement predicts students' achievement. One main element of children's successful adjustment to school is likely to involve their productive engagement in class, as reflected in the extent of their work related interactions with teachers, other students and when working on their own. The likelihood of successful school completion is maximized by student involvement and participation with the schooling process that fosters a sense of commitment and belongingness (Christenson, Sinclair, Lahr, & Godber 2001). This again depicts an emotional dimension of engaging students in learning. In support of this, Shernoff and Hoogstra (2001) stated that, high engagement during tasks in high school classrooms has been a significant predictor of continuing motivation and commitment as well as overall performance in college. Thus, engagement is important because it predicts important outcomes e.g. learning, development and it reveals underlying motivation (Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon and Barch, 2004). Carini, Kuh, and Klien (2006) described general agreement that student engagement is associated with improved learning. Harper and Quaye (2009) suggested a connection between students' engagement and academic success, explaining that students who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities inside and outside the classroom show higher retention rates and higher graduation rates.

## 1.1.2 Methodology

There were two Social Studies' teachers and twenty four students of year 7 in a secondary school are involved in the study. To gather information on teachers' perceptions, three questions are asking for their opinions and understanding on student engagement. The teachers observed on two different lessons and activities. Teachers X and Z were given the Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist. The checklist was used and adapted from the Student Engagement – Teacher handbook, Richard (2009) [Refer to appendix 1]. The purpose of the checklist was not intended to evaluate teacher, but to made observation to obtain specific information about the level of engagement. There are several questions for each criterion that range from scale of "very low" to "very high" to gauge the level of student engagement. The checklist has two parts, where the first part is for direct observation on: Positive body language, Consistent focus, Verbal participation, Student confidence and, Fun and excitement. While the second part of the observation requires the observers to converse

with students to collect details about the degree or perception to which students are engaged in an activity. Questions are provided as a guide for the observers based on: individual attention, clarity of learning, meaningfulness of work, rigorous thinking, and performance orientation. This observation is meant to help reach an agreement in determining the degree of student exhibiting engaging behaviors and in understanding the factors that influence student engagement. The class was given an activity that was intended to promote engagement through active and collaborative learning. Prior to an activity for both lessons, students are instructed to form a group of five and gave them activity that ranging from low-challenge to high-challenge that include the use of collaborative concept mapping and brainstorming. The Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist was then analyzed to find out the level of engagement of students and the factors that influence their engagement. The information on teachers' perception on student engagement was also analyzed to find the common ground or theme in their answers.

## 2. Findings and Discussion

The finding from observations showed that students' level of engagement for the first activity were neither high nor low. This was apparent in their active participation and their exhibition of interest and enthusiasm in group work. The activity was simple, as they were asked to read a textbook together and to pick up some of the important points for discussion later. However, some students were not focus during the activity as they were doing something else such as talking to each other instead of discussing and finding the answers together. Because of this incident, it disrupts the activity and distracts others from learning process. Based on their perceptions when asked by the teacher X, students were able to connect to their experiences, and understand the purpose and meaning of the work. From that lesson or activity, it can be generally said that, students did show a more than enough engagement based on the observation made by teacher X, as students actively participated and asked questions whenever they need assistance. Students were able to describe the purpose of the lesson and exhibit confidence (affective engagement) and can work collaboratively in a group (behavioral engagement).

From the second lesson or activity, the students were clearly exhibiting high positive body language as they were paying attention to the teacher and/or other students. Consistence focus, verbal participation, fun and excitement were all marked as high, which entailed a high engagement level. In term of student confidence, it was marked as medium as some groups were not sure how to do the second part of the activity and few were shy to ask question. There was low clarity of learning and very low performance orientation. When asked by teacher Z on the clarity of learning, students were not clear and did not know the purpose of the lesson, and most did not understand what quality work is and how it will be assessed. However, some students feel comfortable seeking help and asking question, and they did find the work to be interesting and challenging. Generally, it can be said that, students exhibited a medium level of engagement. Students were engaged to do the activity (behavioral engagement) and excited to do a group work (affective engagement) but shown less engagement on cognitive domain.

There was marked evidence that, factors such as positive body language, consistence focus, verbal participation, student confidence and, fun and excitement play a deterministic roles in conceptualizing students' level of engagement. Students who are engaged were able to ask higher-order questions about the lesson, engaged in conversation about the activity and concepts with their groups. Although such confirmation was pleasing but sometimes it was rare to see full engagement demonstrated by students in the class. As been mentioned earlier in the literature review, aspects or dimensions of behaviors, affective and, cognitive were explore to help defined the very nature of engagement. Then again, this also leaves room of questions to me, should students have all of the above dimensions at work at the same time for us to determine the degree of student engagement? One thing for sure amongst others is that, engaged students are more likely to achieve success in their future. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) agreed that engaged students are more likely to earn better grades and perform well on standardized test.

Findings from teachers' perceptions on student engagement in Social Studies for year 7 are:

**Question 1: What is your definition of Student Engagement?**

Based from both teachers, they agreed and defined student engagement as 'students' participation or involvement in the lesson. They also conceptualized 'students' focus and attention during the lesson as part of their definition of student engagement. Through their answers, I can say that, student engagement is conceptualize based on observation of students' behaviors, which is the 'behavioral dimension' and none of them mentioned the other dimensions i.e. 'emotional' and 'cognitive'. Hence, perception of student engagement is based on the evidence that is observable by teachers of students' behaviors.

**Question 2: What methods do you use to inspire students to active in learning? (Your teaching strategies to encourage students to engage in activities)**

Both teachers offered 'short quiz' or 'quick activity' before the lesson as one of the methods to inspire students to be active in learning. Teacher X also depicted various strategies in the answer such as Running dictation, Word Wall, and Class Presentation' as strategies to encourage students to engage in activities. Since these activities require students to think (cognitive domain), it is quite hard for teacher to tell whether students are engaged or otherwise. Robyn & Jenny (2010) explained that cognitive engagement can be much harder to identify because the thinking activity that it entails is usually covert.   Not unless we see evidence from students' participation or active involvement in the activities then we can say that they are engaged. They also pointed out that students need to be present in class (behavioral engaged), and experience a degree of emotional comfort and connectedness (emotionally engaged), before they can become cognitively engaged. In another words, behavioral and emotional engagement are preconditions of cognitive engagement. As teacher Z wrote, 'listen to them, and involve them in your lesson' greatly showed an awareness of emotional dimension of engagement.

**Question 3: Demonstrate an understanding that cultural context (e.g. family background, educational background, learning environment) is a factor in student learning.**

Teacher X agreed that educational background plays an important role in student learning. Further elaborated on student's family background, in which family with good educational background always have higher expectation for their children's education. Hence, students with good educational background and family background could have a good opportunity or bright future. Teacher Z agreed as well those cultural contexts do play a significant factor in student learning, however the teacher begged to differ as it may not always be the case. A family with high educational background may sometimes spoil the child. I may agree that cultural context such as family background and students' educational background do play an important part in students learning, this is because students have the self-believe and motivation from the very beginning   that by working hard they can achieve their goals and get good result. According to Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara & Pastorelli, 1996; Tyler & Boelter, 2008 (cited in Robyn & Jenny, 2010), they explained that those who have high academic self-efficacy participate more actively in learning, are more diligent, persist more, and complete task more successfully than those who have lower self-efficacy. It is safe to say that cultural contexts do play influential role in terms of engagement and, in turn, on achievement and learning of the students.

Apart from that Teacher Z also mentioned that 'a lively, and conducive learning environment create a positive effect and vice versa'. Bryson and Hand, 2007 (cited in Nick Zepke, et al 2010) argued that students are more likely to engage where they are supported by teachers who establish inviting learning environments, demand high standards, challenge, and make themselves freely available to discuss academic progress. Umbach and Wawrzynski, 2005 (cited in Nick Zepke, et al 2010) even agreed that the educational environment created by teacher's behaviors, beliefs and attitudes has a dramatic effect on student learning and engagement. Hence, learning environment is also one of the factors in student learning.

## 4. Conclusion

We know that the more engaged a student is in learning, the greater their chance is for success in school and in the future. To keep students interested and motivated in learning is probably one of the greatest challenges we face as a teacher. Understand that learning needs of students vary between each one of them and fulfilling those needs require great length of planning of suitable lesson and activities to foster student engagement. Clarity of learning and, meaningfulness of work come into play in designing those activities as students can describe the purpose of the lesson and find it interesting, challenging and, fully connected to learning. Windham (2005) recommended that, to engage learners in learning, new educational curriculum and activity must include – "Interaction, Exploration, Relevancy, Multimedia and Instruction". It is clear that, student engagement is not about having a full attendance in class or a mere having good grades, it is more to that, such as – students' verbal participation, their confidence, where they can initiate and complete a task with limited coaching. It is more like a positive process in learning by taking into consideration of the affective and cognitive domains in enabling us to determine the degree of engagement in students.

## Acknowledgement

to the co-author for his commitment and determination for this research.

## References

Carini, R. M., Kuh, J. D., & Klein, S. P. (2006). Student engagement and student learning: Testing the linkages. *Research in Higher Education, 47*(1), 1-32. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11162-005-8150-9

Chapman, E. (2003). Alternative approaches to assessing student engagement rates, *Practical Assessment, Research & Evaluation, 8*(13).

Christenson, S. L., Sinclair, M. F., Lahr, C. A., & Godber, Y. (2001). Promoting successful school completion: Critical conceptual and methodological guidelines. *School Psychology Quarterly, 16*(a), 468-484. http://dx.doi.org/10.1521/scpq.16.4.468.19898

Connell, J. P. (1990). *Context, self, and action: a motivational analysis of self-system processes across the life-span*. In D. Cicchetti (Ed.), e self in transition: infancy to childhood. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fredricks, J. A., Blumenfeld, P. C., & Paris, A. (2004). School engagement: potential of the concept: state of the evidence. *Review of Educational Research*, *74*, 59–119. http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/00346543074001059

Harper, S.R., & Quaye, S. J. (2009). *Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations.* New York: Routledge.

Nick, Z., Linda, L., & Philippa, B. (2010). *Student Engagement: What is It and What Influences it?* New Zealand: Wellington.

Reeve.J, Jang. H, Carrell.H, Jeon. S., & Barch. J, (2004). Enhancing students' engagement by increasing teachers' autonomy support. *Motivation and Emotion, 28*(2), 147-169. http://dx.doi.org/10.1023/B:MOEM.0000032312.95499.6f

Richard, D. J. (2009). *Student Engagement: Teacher Handbook*. The International Center for Leadership in Education. New York: Rexford.

Robyn, G., & Jenny, P. (2010). *Student Engagement in the Middle Years of Schooling (Year 7-10): A Literature Review.* New Zealand: Ministry of Education.

Shernoff, D. J., & Hoogstra, L. (2001). Continuing motivation beyond the high school classroom. *New Directions in Child and Adolescent Development, 93,* 73-87. http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/cd.26

Skinner, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Connell, 1998 as cited in Reeve. J, Jang. H, Carrell. D, Jeon. S, & Barch. J. (2004). Enhancing students' engagement by increasing teachers' autonomy support. *Motivation and Emotion, 28*(2), 147-169.

UNSECO-IBE (2011). *World Data on Education.* International Bureau of Education of UNESCO. 7th Edition. Retrieved on April 2014, from http://www.ibe.unesco.org/links.htm

Willms, J.D. (2003) *Student Engagement at School: a sense of belonging and participation: Results from PISA 2000.* Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Willms, J. D., Friesen, S., & Milton, P. (2009). *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic and intellectual engagement.* (First National Report) Toronto: Canadian Education Association.

Windham, C. (2005). The Student's Perspective. In D. Oblinger & J. Oblinger (Eds), *Educating the Net generation* (pp. 5.1-5.16). Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE. Retrieved 4th March 2014, from http://www.educause.edu/educatingthenetgen

**Appendix**

Appendix 1. Student Engagement Walkthrough Checklist

**Observations**

|  | Very High | High | Medium | Low | Very Low |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Positive Body Language** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Students exhibit body postures that indicate they are paying attention to the teacher and/or other students. | | | | | |

|  | Very High | High | Medium | Low | Very Low |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Consistent Focus** |  |  |  |  |  |
| All students are focused on the learning activity with minimum disruptions. | | | | | |

|  | Very High | High | Medium | Low | Very Low |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Verbal Participation** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Students express thoughtful ideas, reflective answers, and questions relevant or appropriate to learning. | | | | | |

|  | Very High | High | Medium | Low | Very Low |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Student Confidence** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Students exhibit confidence and can initiate and complete a task with limited coaching and can work in a group. | | | | | |

|  | Very High | High | Medium | Low | Very Low |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Fun and Excitement** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Students exhibit interest and enthusiasm and use positive humor. | | | | | |

**Perceptions**

| | Very High | High | Medium | Low | Very Low |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Individual Attention** | | | | | |
| Students feel comfortable seeking help and asking questions. | | | | | |
| *Question to Ask: What do you do in this class if you need extra help?* | | | | | |

| | Very High | High | Medium | Low | Very Low |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Clarity of Learning** | | | | | |
| Students can describe the purpose of the lesson or unit. This is not the same as being able to describe the activity being done during class. | | | | | |
| *Question to Ask: What are you working on? What are you learning from this work?* | | | | | |

| | Very High | High | Medium | Low | Very Low |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Meaningfulness of Work** | | | | | |
| Students find the work interesting, challenging, and connected to learning | | | | | |
| *Question to Ask: What are you learning? Is this work interesting to you? Do you know why you are learning this?* | | | | | |

| | Very High | High | Medium | Low | Very Low |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Performance Orientation** | | | | | |
| Students understand what quality work is and how it will be assessed. They also can describe the criteria by which their work will be evaluated | | | | | |
| *Question to Ask: How do you know you have done good work? What are some elements of quality work?* | | | | | |

| | Very High | High | Medium | Low | Very Low |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Overall Level of Student Engagement** | | | | | |

Adapted from International Center for Leadership in Education.

*Student Engagement – Teacher Handbook (2009).*

**Copyright Disclaimer**