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# Social identity theories and educational engagement

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There is a large body of research in studies of schooling, particularly ethnographic case studies, which posits that collective action among students undermines engagement in school and contributes to educational inequality. In this paper I review studies of engagement from a social identity theory perspective. To what extent can collective action explain why some student groups are less engaged than others? I discuss four approaches to identifying social identity-related problems of engagement frequently used in prior research. While researchers often find problems of engagement among low-academic-status students, research on educational engagement has had difficulty locating the underlying causes of inequality in student engagement. Social identity theories of educational engagement are inherently theories of *collective action*. I conclude that a fifth approach, large-scale observational studies of monitoring and sanctioning, provides the best framework for identifying both the prevalence of, and solutions to, this particular source of disengagement.

**Keywords:** student engagement; social identity theory; social class; tracking; race/ethnicity

## Introduction

There is a large body of research in studies of schooling, particularly ethnographic case studies, which posits that collective action among students undermines engagement in school and contributes to educational inequality. Perhaps the most well-known examples are research that hypothesizes a 'burden of acting white' among minorities (Fordham and Ogbu 1986), and Willis' ([1981] 1977) study of hell-raising among working-class youth. At the heart of this research are questions about how peer-group interaction and intra-group processes affect educational outcomes. Although not explicitly referenced as such, studies that posit a link between collective action among various student groups and disengagement are applications of social identity theory to the study of student engagement.

In this paper I review studies of engagement from a social identity theory perspective. To what extent can collective action explain why some student groups are less engaged than others? I discuss four approaches to identifying social identity-related problems of engagement frequently used in prior research. While researchers often find problems of engagement among low-academic-status students, prior research

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does not convincingly demonstrate that the disengagement of youth with low academic status can frequently be attributed to a social identity mechanism because competing individual and contextual explanations cannot be ruled out. Social identity theories of educational engagement are inherently theories of *collective action*. Research on educational engagement has had difficulty locating the underlying causes of inequality in student engagement. I conclude that a fifth approach, large-scale observational studies of monitoring and sanctioning, provides the best framework for identifying both the prevalence of, and solutions to, this particular source of disengagement.

## An example of social identity theory in education: differentiation-polarization theory

The differentiation-polarization theory of Hargreaves (1967) and Lacey (1966) provides a social identity theory of behavior among low-track students, suggesting that peer-group interactions exacerbate anti-school behavior. I will reference differentiation-polarization theory in explaining the more general framework of social identity theory, and thus provide a brief overview of its logic here.

Because low-track students are labeled as low achieving by the school system, they need to look elsewhere for a positive self-image. As they develop alternatives to school achievement, such as accomplishments in athletics, working on cars, or being a sought-after date on the weekend, they develop group dynamics that support their chosen alternative methods of obtaining this positive self-image. Developing alternative sources of success, and really believing in them, requires collective effort, and is undermined by individuals who conform to the school's definition of success. Thus, peers who exhibit pro-school attitudes or behaviors are sanctioned. Over time, student attitudes in different-track classrooms become polarized, with anti-school attitudes being concentrated primarily among low-track students. The students in the case studies of Hargreaves and Lacey, and later Ball (1981), did not have anti-school attitudes entirely because of their low-track placements, and many low-track students had positive attitudes towards school, but these researchers concluded that tracking greatly polarized the differences in attitudes and behavior between high-track and low-tack students.

## The minimal group paradigm – an experimental basis for social identity theory

Social identity theory was developed by European social psychologists (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986) as a theory of intergroup conflict. In experimental laboratory settings, Henri Tajfel and colleagues (Tajfel 1970; Tajfel et al. 1971) conducted a series of studies using what is now called the 'minimal group paradigm.' The goal was to assess how individuals respond to group membership even in the absence of a particularly salient identity. Tajfel began by asking 14–15 year olds to estimate the number of dots projected briefly on a screen. The participants were then categorized randomly, but were told by the experimenters that people are known to be either over-estimators or under-estimators on this contrived dot task. He discovered that social categorization in and of itself appears to generate intergroup conflict and biased assessment of in-group and out-group members. This was particularly true when groups are determined along a status dimension, which in the original minimal group studies was manipulated by telling participants they were accurate or inaccurate on the

dot estimation task. The minimal group paradigm causes us to ask ourselves: 'If something so arbitrary and seemingly meaningless can affect an individuals' behavior, just think how powerful of an effect a more robust identity such as race or social class might have?'

The early research on the effects of social categorization on in-group/out-group bias links the status assignment of a group with the behavior of the group member toward out-group members. But what about the behavior of group members more generally in a status hierarchy; that is, how do group members, especially those in a low-status group, cope with their status assignment?

The basis of social identity theory is that individuals strive to maintain a positive social identity. The concept that individuals strive to maintain a positive self-concept is central to both psychological and sociological conceptions of the self (Covington and Berry 1976; Goffman 1963). Tajfel and Turner extended this logic to groups. Social identity theory states that 'if social groups or categories are differentiated along a status dimension, then low status group members will be driven to correct their low status, either individually or collectively.' Three alternatives are available to low-status group members. First, low-status group members can engage in *individual mobility*, trying to move themselves out of the low-status group and into the high-status group. Low-status members can also engage in *social creativity*, which consists of one of three approaches: (1) comparing the in-group to the out-group on some new dimension, (2) changing the out-group with which the in-group is compared, or (3) changing the values assigned to the attributes of the group.[1] Finally, low-status groups can try *direct competition* usurping the high status of the out-group on the relevant evaluative dimension.

Individual mobility is a desirable choice, since this option will increase the individual's status on a presumably valued dimension if successful. For example, if a student with low academic status focuses his or her efforts on performing well in school and getting good grades, then they may be able to shed their low-status identity eventually. Even if they do not entirely achieve this goal, they will still have better grades to show for their effort. The direct competition option is not particularly relevant to the school setting, as success is allocated individually. The most important insight of social identity theory is that social creativity is a viable option for addressing low-status group membership.



## Social creativity: comparing the in-group with the out-group on some new dimension

It is the first form of social creativity that educational researchers have documented, comparing the in-group with the out-group on some new dimension. Writing many years before the fundamental basis for social identity theory was established using laboratory experiments, Cohen brilliantly described this form of social creativity with respect to delinquent youth:

> Status problems are problems of achieving respect in the eye's of one's fellows. Our ability to achieve status depends on the criteria of status applied by our fellows, that is, the standards or norms they go by in evaluating people. These criteria are an aspect of their cultural frames of reference. If we lack the characteristics or capacities which give status in terms of these criteria, we are beset by one of the most typical and yet distressing problems of human adjustment. One solution is for individuals who share such problems to gravitate toward one another and jointly establish new norms, new

> criteria of status which define as meritorious the characteristics they *do* posses, the kind of conduct of which they *are* capable. It is clearly necessary for each participant, if the innovation is to solve his status problem, that these new criteria be shared with others, that the solution be a group and not a private solution. (1955, 65–66)

Differentiation-polarization theory for example, highlights this form of social creativity among low-track students. Low-track students reject the notion that academic success is important, focusing instead on other sources of positive self-esteem. Like all forms of social creativity, comparing the in-group with the out-group on new dimensions requires collective action. It requires a group effort to develop new norms of pride and success, and to enforce these norms by sanctioning members who show interest in the school's definition of success (Hechter 1987). This benefits the low-track students cognitively, preserving their positive social identity, but it does nothing for their academic standing or eventual labor market success. Disengagement and failure-avoiding behaviors are temporary psychological mechanisms used to cope with difficulties in school. The initial boost offered by social creativity eventually wears off; as youth age and have bad labor market experiences they often come to regret a lack of success in school (Hagan 1997; Sullivan 1989).

As a theory of student engagement, social identity theory places special emphasis on student value systems. Social creativity is a generalized social phenomenon that can take one of several forms, one of which is a reorientation of values away from school. Behaviors that are hurtful to a student's chances of success in school help him or her maintain a positive social identity in the face of low academic status. Even though this coping mechanism is ultimately harmful to their future lives, social identity theory makes the disengagement of low-status students seem logical rather than irrational. Importantly, however, social creativity is a form of collective action and must be supported by group norms and behaviors.

In the next section I briefly review a number of seminal studies that articulate a social identity theory of engagement that explains educational inequality among several different student groups. Yet despite a rich history of research on this phenomenon, in the aggregate, educational researchers have failed to convincingly determine whether social creativity is a widespread source of disengagement. Using examples of prior research, I discuss four approaches that have been taken in studying this problem; *studies of values, attachment, and engagement*; *studies of popularity and friendship*; *studies of the contagion of peer behavior*; and *studies of contextual effects*. I conclude that while useful collectively, each of these approaches fall short of confirming a social identity-based theory of student behavior when considered in isolation. Moreover, positive forms of social creativity have also been documented; we cannot assume that all low-status student groups will necessarily eschew a pro-school ideology. A fifth approach, *observational studies of monitoring and sanctioning*, is needed to identify both the prevalence of negative forms of social creativity, and the educational contexts which reduce collective action that undermines engagement in school.

## Classic studies of social identity-based disengagement

In the early 1970s Paul Willis ([1981] 1977) conducted an ethnographic case study of a set of 12 working-class boys, the 'Lads,' from a working-class school in Great Britain, which has become a classic portrait of social creativity. The boys were selected because they were part of the same friendship group, and, in contrast to

many other students at 'Hammertown Boys School,' they had a well-defined oppositional culture, they eschewed the school's achievement ideology and just generally raised hell. The Lads reject the notion that education provides opportunities, or is worthwhile. Consistent with social identity theory, the lads rely on social creativity to reshape their social norms. Central to this successful effort at social creativity is their projection of manual labor as masculine, and schoolwork as feminine, and the deriding of any students who do well in school. Rejection of schooling among the Lads thus sits at the intersection of both their social class identity and gender identity, and is highly successful. In the Lads' case, social creativity helps preserve their positive social identity; the fact that they end up as shop-workers, as their fathers before them, seems on the surface to be a willing (and masculinity-affirming) choice. Other case studies, like those by Eckert (1989) and McLaren (1986) reported similar forms of social creativity among low-socio-economic (low-SES) youth in other urban areas.

Similar to theories of social class and engagement, John Ogbu and colleagues have argued that black students are prone to developing anti-school attitudes and behaviors. The relative disadvantage of black students, coupled with their racial identity, is hypothesized to lead to reduced attachment to school (Ogbu 1990; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). An important element of this multifaceted argument highlights peer-group norms and interactions. Ogbu theorized that black youth sanction peers who show interest in school by labeling school attachment as 'white.' Although not typically discussed as such, the 'Burden of Acting White' hypothesis is a social identity theory of reduced student engagement similar to the research on peer-group behavior among working-class youth but focusing on racial identity instead.

The influential studies of race and social class have much in common with the studies of disengagement among low-track students by Hargreaves (1967), Lacey (1966), Ball (1981), and Abraham (1989). Research on all three student identities suggests a social identity mechanism of disengagement; low-status students reject schooling in favor of a value system where they can achieve a positive social identity. Moreover, these studies share a similar methodological approach. The strength of these close ethnographic studies is that they illustrate social creativity in action. In a close study of peer-group interaction, the researcher is able to literally observe the monitoring and sanctioning of pro-school behavior. Moreover, the effects on student behavior in these case studies are often profound. The resulting anti-school attitudes and behavior permeate every aspect of schooling, from classroom behavior, to field trips, to after-school forays in vandalism and substance abuse. The anti-school ideologies of these peer groups are highly elaborated. Third, the positive effects of social creativity for low-status youth – increased social acceptance and self-worth – are readily apparent in these studies (Eckert 1989).

But are these processes widespread? What should we infer from a study of 12 working-class boys like Willis' ([1981] 1977) 'Lads?' Did all of the 600 students at Hammertown high, the majority of whom were working class, have an anti-school attitude? They did not. In fact, Willis studied 'conformist' students as well. What can explain why some Hammertown boys rejected school while others embraced it? In the following sections I discuss a number of approaches to the study of social creativity effects. Despite the convincing ethnographies of social creativity effects in action, I will argue that it is difficult to conclude from existing studies that this process represents a significant educational problem, or to propose and evaluate solutions to this problem.

**Surveys of student values, attachment, and engagement**

Perhaps the simplest approach to studying social identity theories of student engagement is to measure the values, attachment, and engagement of students from different social groups, together with other measures of student background, and to use quasi-experimental regression methods to isolate the effects of social identity. This is an important first-step in understanding the social determinants of student engagement; are low-SES, low-track, or minority students more likely to be disengaged in the first place, or to hold anti-school values?

A number of large-scale studies have investigated engagement and related constructs (attitudes, effort, participation, task completion) among students of differing social class. A few studies report null effects of social class on engagement (Shernoff and Schmidt 2008; Shouse, Schneider, and Plank 1992) but most studies find a positive effect of social class on engagement (Kelly 2008; Carbonaro 2005; Marks 2000; Lee and Smith 1995; Davies 1995). Poverty (or low SES more generally) is widely conceptualized as a 'risk factor' for disengagement (Finn 1993). Similarly, with very few exceptions (for example, Wiatrowski et al. 1982), research on tracking finds that low-track students have lower expectations of educational success (Vanfossen, Jones, and Spade 1987) and aspirations (Lee and Bryk 1988), and are more likely to be disengaged than high-track students (Carbonaro 2005; Gamoran et al. 1995; Berends 1995; Oakes 1985; Metz 1978; Rosenbaum 1976). In contrast, evidence from recent large-scale quantitative research shows that, controlling for SES, black students are not in fact any more likely to have anti-school attitudes or aspirations than white students (Morgan and Mehta 2004; Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1997).

Such basic studies of differences in engagement and engagement-related constructs are essential in documenting whether there is a robust association between a social identity and engagement that might be explained by collective action. A critical component of that is controlling for levels of achievement. Theories of achievement motivation suggest that low-achieving students have an incentive to become disengaged in order to maintain a positive sense of self-worth regardless of peer-group behavior (Covington and Berry 1976). Even with robust controls for selection bias at the individual level, however, it is difficult to rule out competing explanations for disengagement associated with school context; in particular, the effects of instructional context and perceptions of opportunity. If low-track students, low-SES students, and minority students are schooled in less engaging contexts, then it will be difficult to statistically separate the effects of instruction from student identities. For example, instruction in low-track classrooms has been characterized as having an emphasis on memorization (Nystrand and Gamoran 1997), a preoccupation with order and decorum (Page 1991; Metz 1978), and a low coherence both across lessons (Page 1991) and with students lives outside the classroom (Page 1991; Caughlan and Kelly 2004). Researchers should make a greater effort to address these difficulties statistically by using models that compare students within the same educational contexts. However, issues of external validity, the ability to make inferences about segregated learning environments, will remain.

**Studies of popularity and friendship**

Friendships, and social networks in general, are characterized by homophily; individuals are more likely to be friends with like individuals (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and

Cook 2001). In schools, students who are of the same race/ethnicity or achievement level, or in the same track, are much more likely to be friends (Kubitschek and Hallinan 1998; Hallinan and Williams 1989; Tuma and Hallinan 1979). Moreover, friends in high school appear to exert an influence on each others' level of engagement. For example, Hallinan and Williams (1990) found that students' decision to attend college was influenced by their friends' educational expectations and decision about attending college. Crosnoe, Cavanagh, and Elder (2003) found that friends' attachment to school and level of achievement influenced a students' level of engagement.[2] Consistent with social identity theory, these findings could be interpreted as representing not only basic homophily and propinquity, but as revealing a shared *reaction* to school (Eckert 1989). Unfortunately, however, it is difficult to separate the influence of a friend from the decision to befriend an individual, and what that might say about a students' underlying alignment to school. These studies may simply reveal that homophily in friendship choice includes students' alignment to school.

Studies of popularity have also been used to investigate social identity theories of disengagement. If high-achieving students are sanctioned by their peers, then perhaps this might show up in measures of popularity, with high-achieving members of groups that have low academic status being deemed less popular or liked by their peers. Several researchers have investigated this issue among race/ethnic groups in the NELS:88 data, where a number of questions were asked about student popularity. Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) found that being thought of as a good student was positively related to popularity, *especially* among black students. Cook and Ludwig (1997) investigated whether students who received mostly A grades or participated in an academic honor society reported being less popular. Among both black and white students, high achievement led to increased popularity, and in many cases even more so among black students. At predominantly black schools, participation in academic honors society had a particularly strong positive effect on popularity. At least among this one social group, studies of popularity do not support a social identity theory of disengagement – although since there is little evidence that black students are particularly disengaged, this should not be surprising. More generally, studies of popularity may not necessarily reveal the extent of an oppositional culture. In Eckert's (1989) investigation of a school where students were highly polarized along social class lines, both pro-school and anti-school student groups offered the possibility of friendship. In large comprehensive high schools, the plurality of social groups may preclude a singular definition of 'popular' (Kinney 1993).



## Studies of the contagion of peer behavior

In addition to studies of student-reported friendship and popularity, researchers have investigated the contagion of misbehavior and disengagement within classrooms. Does having a disengaged friend in the same classroom, or even just a disengaged classmate in the same work group, increase the likelihood that others will become disengaged? Studies of the influence of peers in the school setting suggest that adolescents are indeed susceptible to peer influence, and thus potentially to the monitoring and sanctioning processes that support social creativity. In McFarland's (2001) observational study of disruptive behavior, he found a small but statistically significant association between the disruptive behavior of a student's friends, and the likelihood of subsequent disruptive behavior. Felmlee, Eder, and Tsui's (1985) observational research suggests an even stronger contagion effect; inattentive behavior by a reading

group member (not necessarily even a friend) increased the likelihood of subsequent inattention by 317%.

Studies of the general contagion of peer behavior illustrate the susceptibility of students to peer influence, and hence that social creativity effects could be quite powerful when in place. However, merely demonstrating that peers influence each others' behavior does not illuminate the extent to which a social creativity effect is responsible for student disengagement because the source of misbehavior cannot necessarily be traced to students' social identity. For example, inattentive and disruptive behavior may be a response to instruction that is not adequately engaging. Alternately, peer contagion may simply illustrate modeling behavior, not necessarily an underlying change in students' alignment to school supported by group norms.



**Studies of contextual effects**

In addition to the basic research paradigm of social identity theory, experimental research in the social psychology of group behavior has formulated hypotheses linking a low-status individuals' behavior to characteristics of the social setting, in particular the *legitimacy of the status assignment* and the *permeability of group boundaries*. When the perceived legitimacy of the individual's assignment is high, low-status members are more likely to identify strongly with the low-status group and favor them on allocation tasks (Ellemers, Wilke, and Van Knippenberg 1993). In a meta-analysis of 37 papers, Mullen, Brown, and Smith (1992) found that individuals in low-status groups identify more strongly with their group in real-life groups than in experimental groups. This may be because status assignment in real-life groups is perceived to be more 'legitimate.' In experimental research, in contrast, the assignment to groups often has no legitimacy beyond that of the influence of the experimenter, because the group assignments are random and are based on a contrived task. One way to interpret the findings on perceived legitimacy is that individuals' behavior is more heavily influenced by a social identity when that identity is highly salient than when it is a peripheral aspect of their overall sense of self.

If legitimate assignment criteria make the social creativity option more likely to occur, the opposite is true of *permeable group boundaries*, which make the individual mobility option more likely to occur. Wright, Taylor, and Moghaddam (1990) found that when the openness of the high-status group is experimentally manipulated, even the slightest opportunity for individual mobility will be taken, particularly if the low-status group member is closer to the high-status group on the evaluative dimension. However, they also found that higher levels of permeability led to a greater perception of legitimacy. Thus, for low-status members who are quite distant from the high-status group on the evaluative dimension, permeability might actually increase their group identification and propensity for social creativity.

Differences in the permeability of group boundaries, the legitimacy of the status assignment, or other contextual variables may be useful in identifying negative social creativity effects if they can be operationalized in the school setting. For example, Kelly (2008) investigated the relationship between individual status effects on engagement (race/ethnic and social class status) and the composition of classrooms. Kelly hypothesized that if minorities or low-SES students were more likely to be disengaged in predominantly minority or low-SES classrooms, this might indicate the stronger presence of monitoring and sanctioning processes that support social creativity in those contexts. Similar to studies of peer contagion, it seems difficult to rule out

competing explanations for an observed relationship in studies of contextual effects. A relationship between classroom composition and disengagement could indicate the strength of monitoring and sanctioning, or it could represent an instructional effect associated with classroom composition.

## Positive forms of social creativity

It is especially important to evaluate studies of disengagement among the low-status student group with a critical lens, because positive forms of social creativity have also been documented. Several qualitative studies of peer-group interactions illustrate why many black students maintain a positive overall approach to schooling, despite the fact that they must overcome negative teacher perceptions of behavior (Tyson 2003), low-track placements (Gamoran and Mare 1989), and other barriers to success. Macleod (1987) attributed the pro-school attitudes of the 'Brothers,' an impoverished black peer group, to an alternate, more positive form of social creativity, changing the out-group with which they compare themselves. MacLeod found that these youth compared themselves not with whites, or other more advantaged groups, but with their parents' generation. Even though their chances of success (and current status) were low relative to advantaged white students, they pursued success in school because it was clear to them that their chances of success were considerably greater than that of their parents' generation.

Compared with early case studies of disengaged peer groups, recent ethnographic research provides a more balanced assessment. While not denying the existence of negative peer pressure among black students, Horvat and Lewis (2003) found that it was offset by equally strong peer networks supportive of school success. Similarly, in a study of peer-group interactions among black students in elite, predominantly white schools, Datnow and Cooper (1998) found that some friends outside school rejected school success, but friends within school mostly supported each others' academic success. Carter (2005) found that while minorities do sometimes label behavior as 'acting white' in an effort to foster solidarity and cultural pride, this is not primarily a distinction attached to academic behaviors; the goal seldom appears to be to sanction someone with educational aspirations. Similarly, Tyson, Darity, and Castellino (2005) reported that disparagement of high-achieving students was not particularly racialized; only a small fraction of black students were targeted as 'acting white.'

## The prevalence of social creativity effects

While each of the four approaches discussed above have limitations, when taken together they provide some evidence on the prevalence of social creativity effects among student groups. Unfortunately, different approaches have been used piecemeal in the study of specific student groups. When researchers compare the attitudes and engagement of black students to whites in large surveys, they find no evidence that black students are more likely to have oppositional attitudes, or to be disengaged (Morgan and Mehta 2004; Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Cook and Ludwig 1997). Most research shows that students from low-SES backgrounds have moderately lower levels of engagement (Kelly 2008; Carbonaro 2005; Marks 2000; Lee and Smith 1995; Davies 1995). Students in low-track classrooms have substantially lower levels of engagement (Carbonaro 2005; Gamoran et al. 1995; Oakes 1985; Metz 1978; Rosenbaum 1976). Do studies using other analytic methods support a social

Table 1. Summary of research on social identity theories of educational engagement.

| Identity | Ethnographic evidence of social creativity | Bivariate association with engagement | Quantitative evidence of peer group effects |
|---|---|---|---|
| Social class | Yes | Moderate | Not enough evidence |
| Race/ethnicity | Mixed | Nil | Nil |
| Track | Yes | Strong | Not enough evidence |

identity theory explanation for disengagement among low-SES and low-track students?

Unfortunately, few large-scale studies of peer-group interactions have been conducted concerning the effects of social class and track-based identities. Kelly (2008) investigated the relationship between the SES effect on engagement and the social class composition of classrooms, an attempt to establish, albeit indirectly, potential social creativity effects, but found no relationship. Felmlee and Eder's (1983) research on the contagion of disruptive behavior in low-ability reading groups certainly suggests a possible social creativity effect, but alternative explanations could not be ruled out. There have been several large-scale studies of popularity and friendship among black students in an attempt to document the mechanism of disengagement among black students, but no negative peer pressure was documented, perhaps simply because black students are no more likely to be disengaged to begin with. Studies using methods similar to those employed by Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998), Roscigno (1998), and Cook and Ludwig (1997) are needed of low-SES and low-track students. The overall findings are integrated in Table 1. While many studies of engagement among student groups with low academic status have been conducted, the full range of analytic approaches has not been applied to any one student identity. With the exception of the simple bivariate associations between student identities and engagement gleaned from survey research, and the consistent findings of negative forms of social creativity among low-SES and low-track students in ethnographic research, the overall findings do not present a clear picture.



## Observational studies of monitoring and sanctioning

Among any group of students, a low average level of school attachment is not necessarily evidence of social creativity effects at work. Indeed, a more likely explanation is a common individual response to disengaging school contexts. A social identity theory of student disengagement is fundamentally a theory of collective action. As with any type of collective action, group norms must be supported by monitoring and sanctioning (Hechter 1987). Such processes can be readily investigated in large observational studies of classroom discourse. Researchers at the Center for Research on English Learning and Achievement (CELA) conducted three large-scale studies of classroom discourse from the mid-1980s through 2005 (Nystrand and Gamoran 1997; Applebee et al. 2003; Langer, Applebee, and Nystrand 2005). The heart of CELA's research is the CLASS program, a real-time, computerized data collection instrument that is used to code video-taped classroom sessions, producing quantitative data on instructional processes. For example, the CLASS data were employed in an event history analysis to show how substantive engagement among students is primed by teachers' use of dialogic question practices (Nystrand et al. 2003). When merged with data from student questionnaires, the relationship between student

identities and engagement can be readily investigated (Kelly 2008). While CELA research emphasized properties of classroom discourse related to teachers' use of dialogic instruction, a similar approach could be used in the study of peer reactions to pro-school and anti-school behavior. In an event-history framework, the effect of incidences of sanctioning (or positive responses to disruptive behavior) on subsequent disengagement or disruptive behavior by different student groups can be interpreted in a probabilistic framework (e.g. How much does the effect of peer sanctioning decrease the likelihood of question asking and answering, and how often does this occur among different student groups). The best evidence of social identity processes is evidence of *monitoring and sanctioning of pro-school behavior*, because these are the intra-group processes that support social creativity. Moreover, observational studies of monitoring and sanctioning would allow researchers to identify the classroom instructional processes that mitigate or exacerbate social creativity among low-academic-status students. For example, is social creativity more common in classrooms where whole class or small group and individualized instruction predominates?



## Conclusion

A widespread explanation for student disengagement emphasizes the role of collective action among peer groups; disengagement is greatly exacerbated when students' sanction pro-school behaviors among peers. This phenomenon can be understood as a social identity theory of student engagement that posits students develop and support an alternative anti-school value-system in order to cope with low academic status. Such group behavior, which undermines engagement and success in school, is a form of social creativity, a type of collective action groups can take to maintain a positive social identity. While there are many classic examples of this phenomenon in ethnographic studies of student groups with low academic status, the prevalence of social creativity is not well documented. Researching social identity theories of student engagement is inherently challenging. Low-academic status is likely to decrease student engagement even if no collective action is present. Moreover, stratified learning environments themselves are implicated in creating problems of disengagement among low-achieving students. Problems of engagement are often problems of instruction (Ames 1992). Several approaches have been taken in attempting to document the prevalence and effect of social creativity on student engagement. When taken as a whole, these studies might provide a robust portrait of social creativity in action. However, at present, not enough evidence exists on this phenomenon. Together with the use of existing approaches, observational studies of monitoring and sanctioning offer the best evidence on how collective action among low-academic-status peer groups might affect engagement.

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## Notes

1. These three approaches are listed using Tajfel and Turner's exact phrasing except for 'social creativity,' which is my own over-arching term for this category of responses to low status.

2. These studies did not address whether particular student groups had negative school outcomes because of the influence of their friends, although that would seem to follow logically from their results. Roscigno (1998) reports that black students are *less* likely to have peers who are adverse towards educational success than whites.

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