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### Concepts of school engagement in the context of geographic isolation

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# Context matters: Concepts of school engagement in the context of geographic isolation

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## Abstract

This case study research represents an attempt to gain a better understanding of conceptions of school engagement in a rural, isolated, agricultural mid-western community. Local school administrators, in collaboration with a regional university, chose to make student engagement the focus of deep inquiry in order to better address student concerns, improve teaching, and student outcomes. Researchers interviewed students, teachers, and parents in a local high school, using an interview protocol specifically designed for each constituency. The study results point to a mostly behavioral, or compliance driven concept of engagement among all groups interviewed, but further examination of data also show that students tended to voice a desire for a higher degree of agentic engagement, along with a strong need for positive relationships with teaching faculty.

## Introduction

High Plains High School (pseudonym) was among the schools chosen for the inaugural round of Kansas State Department of Education's redesign efforts beginning in 2017. As part of their redesign plan, High Plains High School (HPHS) faculty and staff administered a survey intended to gauge students' engagement, hope, entrepreneurial aspiration, and career/financial literacy (Gallup, 2020). Results of that survey were troubling to faculty, as they examined data that indicated approximately 73% of students indicated they felt either "not disengaged" or "actively *dis*engaged" while at school (Gallup, 2016). HPHS administrators found these results worthy of further study, as they hoped to understand how their students, faculty, and families were conceptualizing school engagement.

This study seeks to understand the various school constituencies conceptualization of student engagement using four frames of reference (cognitive, behavioral, social-emotional, agentic) from the literature base. Cognitively engaged students may tend to be more thoughtful and purposeful in exerting the effort needed to comprehend complex ideas and acquire difficult skills. This speaks to the use of self-regulatory and meta cognitive strategies, and goal directed behaviors (Fredricks, 2011). Behavioral engagement focuses on participation, attendance and positive conduct, and task completion for things like assignments and projects (Fredricks, 2011). Emotional engagement focuses more specifically on the emotional states that students report in reaction to schools, teachers, and related activities (Fredricks, 2011). Agentic engagement has been articulated as one in which the learner has a sense of agency and contributes to the learning and instruction received (Reeve, 2012). These are students who demonstrate a sense of ownership, agency, and pride in their work at school (Fletcher, 2016)

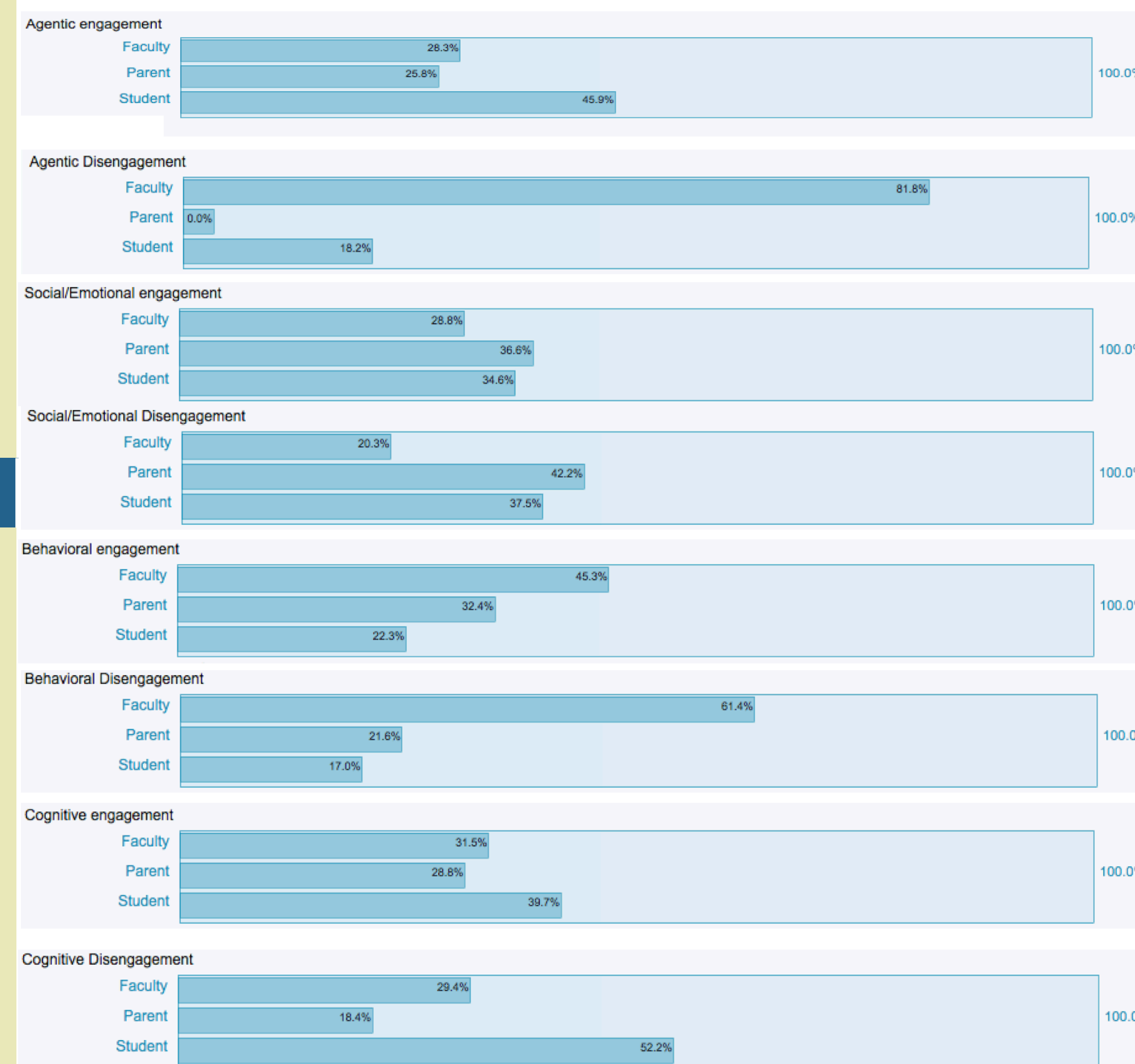
## Methodology

Eighteen interview prompts were developed by researchers to align with research questions, and included items like, "Describe how you see your student's engagement with learning in this school" (parents), "What inspires and engages you?" (students), and "What indicators do you employ in order to gauge student engagement?" (faculty).

Researchers conducted 28 interviews of faculty, parents and students at High Plains HS using video conferencing software. Individual interviews followed a protocol specifically designed for that population with the goal of exploring personal expectations and conceptions of school engagement and beliefs regarding future plans. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and then coded using DeDoose software within a structural scheme consisting of the four conceptions of engagement. Open coding and follow-up questions were also utilized to expand the scope and analysis of the interviews.

## Results

Percentages of 4 engagement conceptual codes attributed to faculty, parent and student constituencies



## Significant Interview Excerpts

### So in a perfect world, what would engagement look like?

#### Students:

Engaged student:

- "Everybody actually doing their work and having good grades..."
- Disengaged student: "I feel like engagement would be helping people..."
- Disengaged student: "Um, maybe the teachers helping a little bit more..."

#### Parents:

- "More communication"..."there's like social classes at play here"
- "(go) back and have that six-hour schedule"
- "pray for the teachers so that that they can be a little bit more aware when students are wanting to reach out to them."
- "More involvement with the teachers"

#### Faculty:

- "it would be every kid being involved in something that matters to them"
- "a sense of belonging community. They want to be a part of something bigger than themselves."
- "participation in class and you know, coming to class ready to learn"
- "more hands-on type project type learning"
- "it will look like note taking, asking questions on what they don't understand"

## Conclusions / Implications

- Students' desire is for positive, caring relationships with teachers
- Teachers' orientation toward engagement appears to be largely behavioral. (grades, homework or task completion, club membership or sports).
- There are perceived engagement gaps between cultural groups
- Students often do not have a clear vision or path for their future.
- Some teachers blame students and parents (background and lack of involved parents)
- There is a need to improve teacher preparation to better understand constituencies conceptions of engagement, the unique needs or rural students, and the skills of building relationships.
- Schools need to rethink the deployment of expertise and technology in addressing career paths and mentors from remote vocations.

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