

TO WHAT EXTENT DO TEACHERS  
AND ADMINISTRATORS PERCEIVE  
THEY IMPACT STUDENT  
ENGAGEMENT IN A RURAL  
SOUTHWEST GEORGIA SCHOOL  
SYSTEM

By  
Priscilla G. Yarbrough

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
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Copyright

Priscilla Graham Yarbrough

May 19, 2018

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory of my father-in-law, William Yarbrough, who passed away on August 9, 2016; and to my mother, Mary Mays Graham, who passed away on August 17, 2016. I wish you both were here to celebrate with me. Without your unconditional love and support, I would not have had the courage or the endurance to complete this journey. Your love of knowledge and your words of encouragement will always be remembered. You both are greatly missed. Your memories will live on forever.

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## Vita

### PRISCILLA GRAHAM YARBROUGH

Columbus State University (Spring 2018)  
Email: [yarbrough\\_priscilla@columbusstate.edu](mailto:yarbrough_priscilla@columbusstate.edu)

#### EDUCATION

Doctor of Education Degree Major: Curriculum and Leadership	Columbus State University Concentration: Leadership	Columbus, GA May 2018
Education Specialist Degree Major: Educational Leadership	Valdosta State University	Valdosta, GA December 2012
Master of Science Degree Major: Educational Leadership	Troy State University—Dothan	Dothan, AL December 2004
Bachelor of Science Degree Major: Business Education	Georgia Southwestern State University	Americus, GA June 1990

#### WORK EXPERIENCE

Early County Board of Education Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Director		Blakely, GA July 2017 – Present
Early County Board of Education Early County High School Served as school-based Response to Intervention Coordinator Certified in Teacher Keys Effectiveness System and Leader Keys Effectiveness System	Assistant Principal	Blakely, GA July 2010 – June 2017
Early County Board of Education Early County High School Chaired the Career, Technical and Agricultural Education (CTAE) Department Served as the lead adviser of Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) Served as the Varsity Football and Basketball Cheerleading Coach	Business Education Instructor	Blakely, GA August 1990 – June 2017

#### AFFILIATIONS

Member of the Georgia Association of Educators  
Member of Student Support Team Association for Georgia  
Member of Newberry African Methodist Episcopal Church

## Abstract

The concept of engagement emerged to understand and improve outcomes for students whose academic performance in school was marginal or poor. The importance of student engagement for achieving success in school was proven in many studies. Lessons designed to engage students helped to improve student achievement at all levels including lower academic performing students and helped to create positive school cultures and classroom learning environments. Very little was known about how teacher beliefs (perceptions of student engagement) influenced student engagement within the classroom. There were only a few studies in which student engagement was examined from the teacher's perspective. To further the research on student engagement, the researcher conducted a correlational design study using a sequential mixed-methods approach. The participants were teachers and administrators from a rural school system located in southwest Georgia. An online self-efficacy assessment measure (Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale) was used to assess teachers' and administrators' perception of student engagement in three factors: *Efficacy in Student Engagement*, *Efficacy in Instructional Strategies*, and *Efficacy in Classroom Management*. Semi-structured follow-up interviews were also conducted to look for reoccurring themes between teachers and administrators regarding their beliefs about their impact on student engagement. Statistically significant differences were found between the mean score of the Administrators and Teachers category of groups on the Teacher's Sense of Efficacy Scale in all areas. Administrators perceived teachers had a greater capacity to impact student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management in the classroom than teachers perceived teachers had.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The concept of engagement emerged as a method to understand and improve outcomes for students whose academic performance in school was marginal or poor (Finn & Zimmer, 2012). Student engagement was an essential component of academic learning, high school graduation, and postsecondary enrollment and completion (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Finn & Zimmer, 2012; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012). The importance of student engagement for achieving success in school was reported in many studies (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Archambault, Janosz, Fallu, & Pagani, 2009; Fredricks & McColskey, 2012; Elffers, 2011). Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris studied student engagement in 2004 in order to understand student engagement. However, only a few studies examined student engagement from the perspective of the teacher (Harris, 2008, 2010, 2011; McMahon & Zyngier, 2009; Ravet, 2007; Zyngier, 2007, 2008).

Evidence of the influence of engagement on learning and student achievement was well established. According to Conroy and Rothstein (2013), achievement levels differed significantly between students from low-income homes and students from high-income homes. The term “achievement gap” was often used to define the differences between the test scores of minority and/or low-income students and the test scores of their Caucasian and Asian peers (Achievement Gap, 2011; National Education Association, 2015; Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). However, in Georgia, the achievement gap was defined as a measure of the change in the gap in standardized achievement scores between school-based high-need students and a statewide benchmark from one year to the next (GaDOE, 2016). The causes of the

achievement gap were studied since the 1966 publication of the Equality of Educational Opportunity report, known as the Coleman Report, commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education (Berliner, 2009). Another source of evidence of the achievement gap was supported by the National Assessment of Educational Progress data (NAEP) (2013). The NAEP was a congressionally mandated project of the U.S. Department of Education that informed the public periodically about the academic achievement of elementary and secondary students at grades 4, 8, and 12 in reading, mathematics, science, writing and other subjects (Vanneman et al., 2009). The NAEP was an assessment that revealed how well states were doing in improving student achievement, and the results were comparable across states thereby, allowing valid comparisons that would be unavailable using results from each state's individual assessments (Rowan, Hall, & Haycock, 2010). According to the NAEP, achievement gaps occurred when one group of students (e.g. students grouped by race/ethnicity, gender) outperformed another group and the difference in average scores for the two groups was statistically significant (e.g. larger than the margin of error) (Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman, & Chan, 2015).

Many factors affected student achievement and contributed to the achievement gap. Coleman, Campbell, Hobson, McPartland, Mood, Weinfeld, and York (1966) suggested that both in-school factors and home/community factors impacted the academic achievement of students and contributed to the gap. Coleman et al., (1966) found that family backgrounds had a greater impact on academic achievement than the characteristics of the school. However, Edmonds (1979) and Rutter, Maughan, Mortimore, and Ouston (1979) challenged the Coleman Report findings and suggested

that student achievement was greatly influenced by the characteristics of the school as an organization. Rutter et al. (1979) also found that differences in behavior and achievements in schools were associated with climate and expectations, and not with the financial or physical resources available to students.

Researchers found teacher effectiveness to be the most important in-school factor affecting student achievement (Aaronson, Barrow, & Sanders, 2007; Marzano, Pickering, & Heflebower, 2011). However, schools in lower-income districts tended to acquire less qualified teachers and have fewer educational resources because funding systems allocated fewer resources to poorer districts than to wealthier districts. Schools with high concentrations of low-income and minority students received fewer instructional resources than others in the same district (Clark, 2013). Furthermore, minority students tended to be concentrated in low-achieving, highly segregated schools. Minority students were often over-represented in special education programs and placed into lower educational tracks based on teachers' and administrators' expectations for minority students (Clark, 2013). Typically, African American and Hispanic students were enrolled in greater numbers in special education programs and were underrepresented in gifted programs (Yoon & Gentry, 2009).

Although educational reform efforts were initially focused on teacher quality, school leadership was studied extensively with research findings supporting an empirical link between school leadership and improved student achievement (Wallace Foundation, 2011a). The current emphasis in educational reform focused on the need for highly capable school leadership to change educational outcomes (Cheney, Davis, Garrett, & Holleran, 2010). Subsequently, researchers found, it was neither teachers alone nor

principals alone who improved schools, but teachers and principals working together (Schmidt-Davis & Bottoms, 2011).

Principal leadership was the second largest in-school factor in determining student achievement with the first being quality teaching (Wallace Foundation, 2011b; 2012).

“There were virtually no documented instances of troubled schools being turned around in the absence of intervention by talented leaders” (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 5). While there were other factors within the school that contributed to these turnarounds, leadership was the catalyst. Both highly effective teaching and highly capable school leadership promoted change outcomes for children in schools. Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, Anderson, Michlin, and Mascall (2010) found effective school leadership was critical to student achievement and was even more important in turning around low-performing schools (Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010; Wallace Foundation, 2011a).

Cheney et al., (2010) suggested schools needed effective principals who created a school culture of high expectations and focused on learning for both students and adults. According to the Wallace Foundation (2012) effective principals performed five key practices well: 1) They shaped a vision of academic success for all students; 2) created a climate hospitable to education; 3) cultivated leadership in others; 4) improved instruction; and 5) managed people, data, and processes to foster school improvement. Leithwood et al. (2004) further suggested that recruitment, training, evaluation and ongoing professional development was considered highly cost-effective approaches to successful school improvement. Effective principals worked relentlessly to improve achievement by focusing on the quality of instruction (Portion, Knapp, Dareff, Feldman,

Russel, Samuelson, & Yeh, 2009). The researchers posited that the job of the school principal was one of the toughest in our nation and one of the most valuable. High-quality school leaders were in great demand and there were strong calls for better principal preparation programs (Knapp, Copland, Honig, Plecki, & Portin, 2010).

To promote school improvement efforts, several federal accountability initiatives (e.g. Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1975), No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), Race to the Top (RTTT, 2009), and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) and Georgia's accountability measures (e.g., Response to Intervention process, College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) reports, and Teacher Keys Effectiveness System) (GaDOE, 2016) were initiated to provide high quality research-based instruction, intervention strategies, and data driven practices to help all students succeed within the general education curriculum (GaDOE, 2016). Initially, ESSA implementation was set for the 2017-2018 school year; however, as of March 2017 state and federal government agencies had not developed or implemented the ESSA mandates (USDOE, 2017). The Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE, 2016) Accountability Division and the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA, 2017) provided all stakeholders with important information on the performance and progress of Georgia schools, districts, and the state, and published the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI) reports (GaDOE, 2016). The CCRPI (2016) was a score that helped educational leaders measure and promote college and career readiness for all Georgia public school students. This score included four main components: achievement, progress, achievement gap, and

challenge points. The performance of student subgroups, school climate, and financial efficiency status was also reported (GaDOE, 2016).

With guidance from the federal education accountability initiatives, Georgia focused on providing high quality research-based instruction, interventions, and data driven practices to help all students succeed in the general education curriculum by using Student Support Teams (SST) and Response to Intervention (RTI) strategies (GaDOE, 2016). Student Support Teams first emerged in the 1970's as a school-level intervention team whose primary purpose was to ensure high learning outcomes for all students (Chalfant, Pysh & Moultrie, 1979). In addition, Georgia mandated SSTs as a part of a legal permanent injunction from the federal court case, *Marshall v. GA, 1984*, to deal primarily with disproportionate placement of minority students in special education. While the state prevailed in this case, it became obvious that there was no standard process for students to receive individualized help in the general education classroom for learning or behavior difficulties. Instead, students requiring extra help usually were placed in special education and removed from the general classroom (GaDOE, 2016). The SST's function was to offer a problem-solving team approach to preventing inappropriate referrals to special education and unnecessary removal of students from the general education classroom.

To prevent inappropriate referrals to special education and unnecessary removal of students from general education, Georgia implemented a framework to guide this process. Georgia's RTI process, the Georgia Pyramid of Interventions, was a four-tier model designed to find and address students' academic and/or behavioral needs (GaDOE, 2016). RTI was a practice of academic and/or behavioral interventions designed to offer

early, effective help to underperforming students (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017). Standards-based instruction, universal screening, and progress monitoring were the critical foundation elements of this model. The tiered instruction included varying levels of instructional intensity within a tiered delivery model (i.e., Tier 1 – Standards-based classroom learning; Tier 2 – Needs-based learning; Tier 3 – SST-driven learning; and, Tier 4 – Specially-designed learning). The core principle was that Tier 1 high quality, evidence-based instruction was provided with fidelity in the general education class, student progress was monitored often, students’ responsiveness to intervention was evaluated, and instruction was adapted as needed (GaDOE, 2016; National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2017).

Research evidence on the potential of RTI to decrease the disproportionate number of minority students being placed in special education was rare. A review of the literature found that there were only two studies that addressed RTI’s effect on disproportionality. Disproportionality was the inappropriate over-identification or disproportionate representation by race and ethnicity of children as children with disabilities (GaDOE, 2016). Marston, Muyskens, Lau, and Canter (2003) found that the RTI process significantly decreased placement rates of minority students in special education and reduced disproportionality for African American male students; however, VanDerHeyden, Witt, and Gilbertson’s (2007) study findings reported no significant statistical differences in placement rates.

The challenge that teachers faced when engaging students of different abilities, genders and ethnicities was significant. However, the more equipped teachers were to meet a variety of student ability levels, the more instructional impact they had. Although

the literature did not agree on a definition for student engagement, earlier researchers defined student engagement primarily by observable behaviors such as participation and time-on-task (Brophy, 1983; Natriello, 1984). More recent researchers incorporated emotional or affective aspects into their definition of student engagement (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016; Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Fredricks et al. (2004) studied aspects of cognitive engagement, such as students' investment in learning, perseverance in the face of challenges, and teachers' use of deep instead of superficial strategies.

Appleton et al. (2008) included self-regulation (the extent to which students demonstrated control over their learning actions) as a part of cognitive engagement. Engagement, as defined by Marzano et al. (2011) answered the question of importance and self-efficacy for students. Exploring the areas of student engagement and authentic learning opportunities, Hallermann, Larmer and Mergendoller (2011) emphasized that authentic, project-based, hands-on learning opportunities improved engagement, increased student achievement and helped develop lifelong learners. Additional definitions for student engagement included: participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom that led to a range of measurable outcomes (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2011) the extent to which students engaged in activities that research findings reported linked to high-quality learning outcomes (Krause & Coates, 2008); and, the quality of effort students themselves devoted to educationally purposeful activities that contributed directly to desired outcomes (Hu, Kuh, & Li, 2008).

Several educational researchers conceptualized student engagement as a meta-construct consisting of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Appleton et al., 2008; Archambault et al., 2009; Axelson & Flick, 2010; Boekaerts, 2016; Finn &