



Student Engagement Of College Students In Relation To Academic Competence: An Empirical Study

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the relationship between student engagement and academic competence among college students. Employing an ex-post facto design, the study collected data from 600 college students across three districts of Punjab, India, using standardized scales for student engagement and academic competence. Descriptive, differential, correlational, and regression analyses were conducted. Results indicate a moderate to high level of student engagement and academic competence among students. Significant differences were observed based on gender, locale, and academic stream, with male, urban, and arts students showing higher engagement. Academic competence demonstrated a significant positive correlation with student engagement ($r=0.53$), explaining 28.3% of its variance. The study concludes that academic competence is a critical predictor of student engagement, highlighting the need for educational strategies that enhance both academic skills and active participation in learning.

Keywords: Student Engagement, Academic Competence, College Students, Punjab, Higher Education

1. Introduction

Education is a transformative process that shapes an individual's moral, mental, and emotional development. It serves as the foundation for personal and societal progress, fostering peace, prosperity, and human potential. As Tagore (1913) emphasized, education is not merely the acquisition of knowledge but the holistic development of the individual—physically, mentally, and spiritually. In contemporary educational discourse, student engagement has emerged as a pivotal construct, reflecting the degree to which students are actively involved in their learning processes.

Student engagement encompasses behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004). It is influenced by a multitude of factors, including academic competence—a multidimensional construct comprising the skills, attitudes, and behaviors that contribute to academic success (DiPerna & Elliott, 1999). Academic competence enables students to navigate academic challenges, utilize learning strategies, and achieve educational goals.

Despite the recognized importance of both constructs, limited research has explored their interrelationship in the Indian higher education context, particularly among college students in Punjab. This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between student engagement and academic competence, with attention to demographic variables such as gender, locale, and academic stream.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Student Engagement

Student engagement refers to the level of attention, curiosity, interest, and passion students exhibit during learning (Harper & Quaye, 2009). It is a dynamic and multifaceted construct involving behavioral participation, emotional connection, and cognitive investment. Engaged students attend classes regularly, participate actively, and demonstrate a sense of belonging and motivation. Trowler (2010) conceptualizes engagement as the collaborative investment of time, effort, and energy by students and institutions to enhance learning outcomes.

2.2 Academic Competence

Academic competence is defined as the integration of skills, attitudes, and behaviors that facilitate academic achievement (DiPerna & Elliott, 1999). It includes domains such as academic skills (e.g., reading, writing, mathematics) and academic enablers (e.g., motivation, study habits, social skills). Competent students are better equipped to set goals, self-regulate, and persist in challenging academic tasks.

2.3 Relationship Between Engagement and Competence

Prior studies suggest a reciprocal relationship between engagement and competence. Students with higher academic competence tend to engage more deeply in learning activities, while engaged students develop greater competence over time (Hattie, 2009; Zimmerman, 2002). However, most research has been conducted in Western contexts, underscoring the need for region-specific investigations.

3. Statement of the Problem

The study aims to investigate the relationship between student engagement and academic competence among college students in Punjab, India. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the level of student engagement among college students?
2. How does student engagement vary across gender, locale, and academic stream?
3. What is the relationship between student engagement and academic competence?

4. Objectives

1. To study student engagement among college students.
2. To examine differences in engagement based on gender, locale, and stream.
3. To assess the relationship between student engagement and academic competence.

5. Hypotheses

1. There will be no significant difference in student engagement between male and female college students.
2. There will be no significant difference in student engagement between rural and urban college students.
3. There will be no significant difference in student engagement among students from different academic streams.
4. There will be a significant positive relationship between student engagement and academic competence.

6. Methodology

6.1 Design

The study employed an ex-post facto correlational design, exploring relationships between variables without manipulation.

6.2 Sample

A sample of 600 college students (300 male, 300 female; 300 urban, 300 rural) was randomly selected from three districts of Punjab (Hoshiarpur, Malerkotla, Mansa), stratified by literacy rate.

6.3 Tools

- **Student Engagement Scale** (Singh et al., 2014)
- **Academic Competence Scale** (researcher-developed and standardized)

6.4 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics, t-tests, correlation coefficients, and regression analysis were used to analyze the data.

7. Results

7.1 Descriptive Statistics

The mean student engagement score was 133.94 (SD = 17.3), indicating a moderate level of engagement. Academic competence scores averaged 91.33 (SD = 15.22), reflecting moderate competence.

7.2 Differential Analysis

- **Gender:** Male students ($M = 140.0$) showed significantly higher engagement than females ($M = 136.5$), $t=2.65,p<0.01$
- **Locale:** Urban students ($M = 147.3$) were significantly more engaged than rural students ($M = 141.3$), $t=2.66,p<0.01$
- **Stream:** Arts students ($M = 150.4$) reported higher engagement than science students ($M = 147.5$), $t=1.99,p<0.05$

7.3 Correlation Analysis

A significant positive correlation was found between student engagement and academic competence ($r=0.53,p<0.01$). This relationship held across gender, locale, and stream subgroups.

7.4 Regression Analysis

Academic competence significantly predicted student engagement, explaining 28.3% of its variance ($R^2=0.283,F=157.1,p<0.01$). The regression equation was:

$$\text{Student Engagement} = 84.62 + 0.488 \times \text{Academic Competence}$$

8. Discussion

The findings confirm that academic competence is a strong predictor of student engagement. Students with higher competence are more likely to participate actively, persist in tasks, and exhibit emotional and cognitive investment in learning. The gender, locale, and stream-based differences highlight the influence of contextual and sociocultural factors on engagement.

Male students' higher engagement may be attributed to social and classroom dynamics that favor assertive participation. Urban students' advantage likely stems from better access to resources, infrastructure, and academic support systems. Arts students' greater engagement may reflect pedagogical approaches that emphasize discussion, creativity, and subjective expression.

The positive correlation between engagement and competence aligns with existing literature (Hattie, 2009; Zimmerman, 2002), reinforcing the interdependence of these constructs. Educational interventions that enhance academic skills and foster self-regulated learning are likely to improve both competence and engagement.

9. Conclusions

1. College students in Punjab exhibit moderate levels of student engagement and academic competence.
2. Engagement varies significantly by gender, locale, and academic stream.
3. Academic competence is a significant predictor of student engagement, accounting for over 28% of its variance.
4. Holistic educational strategies that integrate skill development, motivational support, and personalized learning are recommended to enhance both competence and engagement.

10. Educational Implications

- **For Educators:** Incorporate competence-building activities, such as explicit strategy instruction, formative feedback, and goal-setting exercises.
- **For Institutions:** Develop resource centers, peer mentoring programs, and digital learning tools to support rural and female students.
- **For Policymakers:** Promote professional development on engagement-focused pedagogy and equitable resource allocation across regions.

11. Limitations and Future Research

The study is limited to government college students in Punjab. Future research could include private institutions, longitudinal designs, qualitative methods, and cross-cultural comparisons. Investigating the role of technology, teacher-student relationships, and institutional climate in moderating the engagement-competence relationship is also recommended.

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