Educators’ Predictions of Disengaged Students’ Academic Beliefs


The academic opinions of learning disabled high school students with criminal or chronic misconduct are often missing from research on educational standards and expectations. By simply observing behavior, educators are likely to draw inaccurate inferences about students’ knowledge. It becomes easy to focus on the misbehavior and negative attitudes of students with conduct disorders, perpetuating cycles of misunderstanding. To improve communication, some researchers have explored adolescents’ misconceptions of the intentions of others (Graham, 2004). It might also be helpful to determine if educators sometimes facilitate miscommunication by drawing distorted inferences about the positive intentions of their students. To test this possibility, we compared the beliefs of this special group of students and the educators who work with them. We asked,

- Can educators accurately predict the civil identities of students with criminal or chronic misconduct?
- Do students’ beliefs about an ideal school match educators’ predictions of those beliefs?
- Do educators and students agree on how often students use positive and negative excuses during academic interactions?

Theoretical Perspectives

Educators have been known to offer inaccurate predictions of adolescents’ beliefs about their personality (Laidra, Allik, Harro, Merenaäkk, & Harro, 2006). Teachers and counselors have also offered images that were more negative than those reported by adolescents, regardless of whether the students evaluated their self-images or common stereotypes about adolescents (Seginer & Somech, 2000). Extending this work, we asked adolescents who have trouble functioning in a typical school to report their civil identities, beliefs about an ideal school, and how often they use positive and negative excuses. We also asked the educators who work with these adolescents to predict their students’ beliefs. Our goal was to see if adolescents and educators approached education with similar beliefs and to better understand extreme forms of moral engagement and disengagement in academic settings.

To begin such work, we identified common stereotypes about the students in our targeted population. Students who have difficulty functioning in school are often assumed to have either negative beliefs about their future in society (Yowell, 2002) or of the role of school in their lives (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006; van Laar, 2000). These stereotypes can affect educators’ ability to hear the range of positive as well as negative excuses students offer for their behavior (Pakaslahti & Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2000). By identifying areas of agreement and disagreement between students and the educators who work with them, it may be possible to minimize cycles of miscommunication. We predicted that adolescents and educators might agree on the importance of schooling, but that they would hold discrepant beliefs about adolescents’ civil commitments and the excuses they use to justify their behavior to themselves and others.

Methods

Adolescents (n=87; M=16.86 years; 36% female; 82% African American) who were referred to a therapeutic high school because of gross misconduct or chronic behavior problems completed a collection of measures. They reported their civil commitments to a Gemeinschaft community (α=.81) and a Gesellschaft community (α=.84) as well as their belief in a just world (α=.80). These youths indicated their beliefs about an ideal school by considering issues of fairness (α=.87), motivation (α =91), epistemology (α=.84), and the teaching of meta-cognitive strategies (α=.89). They also evaluated the degree to which they use positive (α=.78) and negative excuses (α=.85) as well as the quality of their school (α=.80).
Educators who worked with these adolescents (n=20, M=47.88 years, 67% female, 40% African American) predicted their students’ beliefs using parallel measures (α’s ranged from .97 to .77, M=.90) Educators’ surveys differed only in that they were asked to distinguish strategies for supporting highly motivated students and for encouraging students with low motivation.

Results
Educators offered less positive beliefs about adolescents’ civil commitments than did the adolescents themselves, $F_{(2,104)}=5.14$, $p<.01$, $η^2=.09$, Figure 1. They also indicated that adolescents would probably hold simpler conceptions of an ideal school than were actually reported, $F_{(3,315)}=56.30$, $p<.001$, $η^2=.35$, Figure 2. These findings held when educators distinguished methods of helping both highly motivated and unmotivated students become engaged in school. Educators also indicated that adolescents relied on fewer positive excuses and more negative excuses than the adolescents imagined themselves using, $F_{(1,105)}=55.32$, $p<.001$, $η^2=.35$. It is interesting to note that educators thought adolescents would show more complex beliefs about the types of knowledge that should be explored in school than were apparent in adolescents’ reports. Furthermore, educators and adolescents shared predominantly negative views about the quality of their school, ($M=2.68$ and 2.95 for educators and adolescents, respectively).

Importance
Potential miscommunication is possible if educators misjudge the intentions of their students and this is especially likely when working with students exhibiting conduct disorders. It becomes easy to focus on the problematic beliefs and behaviors of such students without becoming aware of their positive intentions and activities. By asking educators and students to regularly converse about the purposes underlying particular educational activities, it may be possible to formulate educational expectations that can enhance students’ academic success. These possibilities are likely only if educators and researchers begin to accept responsibility for offering distorted representations of adolescents’ views.

References
Figure 1. A comparison of adolescents’ and educators’ beliefs about adolescents’ civil commitments. All means are significantly different from one another, $p<.001$.

Figure 2. A comparison of adolescents’ and educators beliefs about an ideal school. Means are significantly different from one another, $p<.001$ for all except epistemology which is $p<.05$. 