

# Chapter 27

## Student Disengagement in Finnish Comprehensive Schooling



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**Abstract** There is a clear consensus amongst educational researchers that school engagement contributes to students' academic development. However, not all students share the enjoyment of learning and a sense of belonging at school, nor are all of them willing to exert effort in learning and school activities. Students who disengage from school are at risk of a range of adverse academic and social outcomes, which, at worst, culminate in students' decisions to leave school early. Since the beginning of the 1970s, various findings about Finnish students' school engagement have raised concerns along with the question of why Finnish students repeatedly rank lowly in international comparisons of happiness at school. This chapter provides insights into the issue of Finnish student (dis)engagement from school drawing on a range of research and survey data. In our view, student disengagement is a process that develops through an interplay between individual and contextual factors in a vicious circle of negative emotional and cognitive school and learning experiences, and is—if not reversed—rather stable or progressive. For this reason, it is crucial to identify early signs of disengagement and individual, social, and institutional factors associated with it.

The origin of the concept of school disengagement lies in the literature related to students with special needs and students dropping out of school.<sup>1</sup> While school dropout is a widespread problem in many education systems around the world, in Finland, dropping out of basic education is rare. In the academic year 2018–2019, there were only 443 comprehensive school dropouts, which made 0.59% of the age

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group. The percentage is considerably higher for students at upper secondary education level, where around 5% discontinue their studies each year. At this level there are remarkable differences between academic and vocational track: while discontinuation was 3% in general upper secondary education (GUS), it was 9% in initial vocational education and training (VET).<sup>2</sup> It is not, however, the low percentages that count. The Finnish education policy is based on the fundamental principle of including all children and, therefore, a single dropout is too much. For this reason, much attention has been paid to assuring high-quality special needs education and early diagnosing of difficulties in schools. In fact, due to the existence of a flexible support system in schools, some 30% of Finnish comprehensive school students receive special education services at some point in their school career. This is a much higher fraction of the school population than in other OECD countries.<sup>3</sup>

Dropping out and other overt signs of disengagement, such as school truancy, low grades, and disturbance behaviour are easy to spot and intervene in. For such cases, school level practices exist, including multidisciplinary student welfare groups.<sup>4</sup> Well before dropping out, students normally exhibit some symptoms of disengagement from learning, social life, or emotional involvement at school. These earlier signs are usually more covert, which makes early identification and handling of disengagement difficult. However, exactly this kind of disengagement has shown alarming levels among Finnish students compared to students in many other countries as shown by the *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) studies. This has triggered wide public and academic discussions in recent decades. Indeed, even though Finland has constantly been a high achiever in PISA studies, the comparative results have not been as ideal regarding student engagement.<sup>5</sup> For example, Finnish students' feelings about school life and learning, their sense of belonging at school, and student–teacher relations proved more negative than those of students in the other Nordic countries.<sup>6</sup> Looking at the long-term trends, the disengagement has continually increased: Finnish students have ranked 60th out of 65 countries for how much they like school as nearly third of them were classified as being unhappy at school.<sup>7</sup> While reaching the OECD average regarding sense of belonging by the year 2018, Finnish students—on average—feel awkward and out of place in school more frequently when compared to their Nordic counterparts.<sup>8</sup> The comparative results among primary school students do not comfort either: Finnish children have reported less emotional and cognitive engagement than their international peers in several studies.<sup>9</sup>

Both Finnish and international studies indicate that being disengaged is a significant risk for students' academic and social development across and beyond their school career. Students who are disengaged have lower levels of academic achievement, poorer health and wellbeing, and are in an elevated risk for problem behaviors, delinquency, and substance use.<sup>10</sup> Even if disengagement culminates in early school leaving only for a small proportion of students, for those who dropout, it usually predicts an increasing risk of becoming and staying unemployed along with poorer health and mental health outcomes.<sup>11</sup> For these reasons, it is important to pay attention, from early on, to those students who—for one reason or another—show signs of school disengagement. However, it is equally important to pay attention also to

the institutional structures, cultural features, and exclusionary practices of a school that contribute to the disengagement of students. In other words, although an early identification of the first signs of disengagement among students is necessary for the provision of early support, it is not enough. Since student disengagement is a process that develops through an interplay between individual and contextual factors, one should pay attention to these contextual factors, such as institutional schooling arrangements, as well.<sup>12</sup>

### Three Dimensions of Disengagement

Ever since Jennifer Fredricks and colleagues<sup>13</sup> concluded that school engagement relates to a variety of positive academic outcomes in their seminal review, a wealth of research on student engagement has emerged.<sup>14</sup> Encouraged by the evidence that engagement is a malleable state that can be shaped by teacher and school practices,<sup>15</sup> it has been considered a linchpin of endeavours to both promote positive academic outcomes and prevent academic underachievement and dropout.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the vast number of discussions and debates around the concept,<sup>17</sup> (dis)engagement still lacks a universally accepted definition and is described and measured in diverse ways across and even within disciplines. Much of the engagement research suggests that engagement and disengagement represents different ends of the same continuum.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, engagement refers to *the* extent to which students are involved in (behaviourally engaged), attached (emotionally engaged), and committed (cognitively engaged) to academic and social activities in school, whereas disengagement reflect either lower levels or the absence of engagement.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, some researchers have theorised engagement and disengagement as being separate constructs each with their own continua.<sup>20</sup> This approach emphasises that disengagement does not indicate only the absence of engagement but also the presence of maladaptive states and processes.<sup>21</sup>

A widely accepted understanding of disengagement is that it is a meta-construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. Accordingly, disengaged students are "... those who do not participate actively in school and class activities, do not become cognitively involved in learning, do not fully develop or maintain a sense of school belonging, and/or exhibit inappropriate or counterproductive behavior".<sup>22</sup> In addition to the different dimensions, disengagement may exist at different levels. A student may be disengaged with study content, in class, with school, or with education. In its lowest levels, disengagement may appear, for instance, as feelings of boredom (emotional disengagement), disruptive classroom behaviours (behavioral disengagement), and poor self-regulation (cognitive disengagement). Minimal connection to school, absenteeism, and beliefs of irrelevance of education are all considered indicators of a 'higher level' disengagement. In everyday school life, students may be disengaged at all levels or none, or at some levels but not others.<sup>23</sup>

Disengagement components not only interrelate but also mutually shape each other over time.<sup>24</sup> For instance, when a student withdraws emotionally and/or cognitively from school, their participation declines, which may lead to poorer academic performance, which again promotes emotional and cognitive withdrawal. If this cycle continues over the school career, it may culminate in such disaffection with school that the student leaves school entirely. A complex web of proximal processes, including social relationships and participation across multiple environmental contexts, is expected to further influence school (dis)engagement.<sup>25</sup> According to an ecological understanding of human development, student disengagement is the result of an interplay between individual and contextual factors. While individual factors relate to students' behaviour, emotions, and cognitions, contextual aspects refer to different contexts, for instance families, schools, and communities—as well as to key features within them: their composition, structure, resources, and practices.

## Prevalence and Correlates of Disengagement

Due to the complexity of the concept, there is no established practice or single set of indicators to measure the prevalence of student disengagement.<sup>26</sup> As a result there is a lot of variation even within Finnish research in which various markers have been applied as indicators of different types of disengagement. While school dropout is considered an extreme indicator of school disengagement, school truancy presents another strong indicator. It is one manifestation of behavioral disengagement, which is considered to be the primary driver of school dropout.<sup>27</sup> Even though missing school days or classes and being late from school are relatively common in general—and more frequent among Finnish students in comparison to the OECD average—only 2–3% of all Finnish lower secondary school students have a large number of repeated absences from school.<sup>28</sup> Although the truancy rate is rather small, these numbers are growing. The COVID-19 pandemic has particularly contributed to school non-attendance in Finland. According to one survey conducted in spring 2020, 8% of teachers reported that they had been unable to make any contact with some of their students during the school closures.<sup>29</sup>

Finnish students' disengagement exposed by the international comparisons seems to have an emphasis on the earlier and more covert aspects of disengagement, meaning emotional and cognitive disengagement. Drawing on Finnish survey data collected within the *International Study of City Youth (ISCY)*,<sup>30</sup> Table 27.1 provides an overview of the prevalence of these forms of school disengagement among 1058 compulsory school leavers at Grade 9 in Turku sub-region (42.5% response rate). The prevalence of behavioral disengagement, already discussed above, is left outside the scrutiny here. As seen in Table 27.1, cognitive disengagement was measured as students' disengagement with learning and negative attitudes towards school.<sup>31</sup> Respectively, emotional disengagement covered negative feelings about schoolwork and sense of not belonging at school.<sup>32</sup> As the last row of Table 27.1 shows, the overall

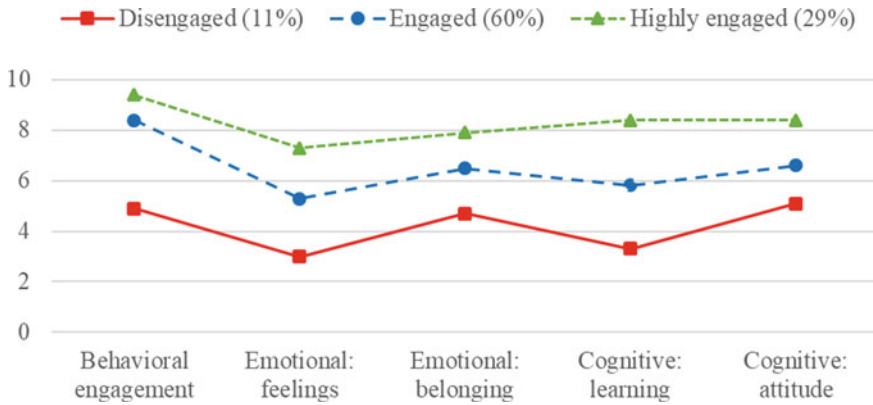
**Table 27.1** Frequency of emotional and cognitive disengagement according to student demographics (percentage of students classified as disengaged)

Student characteristics (n)		Cognitive disengagement		Emotional disengagement	
		Disengagement with learning	Negative attitudes	Negative feelings	Sense of not belonging
Gender	Boy (517)	22.6 <sup>c</sup>	35.5 <sup>b</sup>	24.4 <sup>c</sup>	6.9
	Girl (500)	15.1	25.8	15.0	4.4
Disability	Yes (62)	19.4	37.7 <sup>a</sup>	27.9 <sup>a</sup>	8.2
	No (937)	18.8	30.3	19.1	5.6
Family SES	Low (316)	22.9 <sup>b</sup>	39.3 <sup>b</sup>	24.0 <sup>b</sup>	8.5 <sup>b</sup>
	Medium (474)	16.7	26.7	18.0	4.6
	High (227)	18.3	26.7	16.8	4.0
Immigrant	Yes (67)	14.3	22.7	9.0 <sup>b</sup>	3.0
	No (946)	19.1	31.2	20.3	6.0
Total		19.0	30.7	19.6	5.7

*Note* Immigrant background if student and/or both parents have not been born in Finland; disability based on whether student has a long-term health condition, impairment, or disability that affects learning; family SES (socio-economic status) based on highest ISEI of parental occupation divided into three groups based on the upper and lower quartile. Differences between groups: <sup>a</sup> significant at the 0.05 level; <sup>b</sup> significant at the 0.01 level, <sup>c</sup> significant at the 0.001 level ( $X^2$  tests)

level of school disengagement was high. While students' sense of not belonging was rare (5.7%), nearly a fifth of the students reported not putting effort in learning (19.0%) and/or having negative feelings about schoolwork (19.6%), and as many as a third of them had negative attitudes towards school, thus, perceiving learning irrelevant (30.7%).

As seen in Table 27.1, students' characteristics were connected to disengagement as follows: aligning with both Finnish and international study results, boys were less willing to put an effort into learning, had more negative feelings toward schoolwork, and valued school less than girls.<sup>33</sup> Students with disabilities had more negative attitudes and feelings towards school than students with no disabilities. Moreover, school disengagement—in its every form—was more prevalent among students belonging to the lowest family socio-economic status (SES) group. Students with an immigrant background showed fewer negative feelings towards schoolwork than their native peers did, but did not differ from their Finnish peers in other aspects of emotional and cognitive disengagement. Also, this result aligns with the finding of previous studies about immigrant students' generally positive view towards school. However, compared to students with a long family history in Finland, students with immigrant background tend to show slightly more behavioural disengagement, which occurs, for example, as pronounced truancy or being late for school.<sup>34</sup>



**Fig. 27.1** School engagement profiles among grade 9 students (n = 1022)

One way to examine student disengagement is to apply a person-centered analysis to identify different engagement profiles by unifying behavioural, emotional, and cognitive aspects of engagement. Such studies give more insights on possible subgroups of individuals who engage in school in different ways. The share of disengaged students that have been identified in research varies significantly even within national studies.<sup>35</sup> The numbers for disengaged have varied between 5 and 27%. The wide difference in the share of disengaged students may result from different operationalisation of engagement as well as from the different number of identified subgroups. Drawing on the survey data among Finnish 9th graders in the Turku sub-region just presented, we identified homogeneous profiles through latent-profile analysis using all three dimensions of engagement (Fig. 27.1).<sup>36</sup>

As seen in Fig. 27.1, three profiles show similar patterns across the engagement subscales dividing students into three groups differentiated by the strength of engagement (on a scale of 0–10). The highly engaged students were behaviourally, emotionally, and cognitively engaged, while their disengaged counterparts were disengaged in all of its dimensions. While most students showed at least moderate engagement, 11% of the students were identified as disengaged. While disengagement was found nearly equally common amongst boys (12%) and girls (10%), girls (34%) were clearly overrepresented in highly engaged group compared to boys (22%). Other background variables were associated with engagement profiles as expected: the higher the family’s SES or parental education, the higher was the engagement of their offspring. For instance, while 17% of students from families with low SES were identified as disengaged, the respective percentages among students from families with middle or high SES was eight.

## The Stability of Disengagement and Its Significance for the Future

Despite the malleability of the construct as already discussed, disengagement levels have proven to be persistent.<sup>37</sup> While most students’ engagement usually declines over time, individual students retain their relative position amongst other students. That is, the most disengaged students at the age of 10 are likely to be also the most disengaged students at the age of 16.<sup>38</sup> Longitudinal studies of student disengagement patterns are still relatively rare in Finland. However, the ones that exist show similar findings to international studies: school disengagement seems to increase over time and predict lower educational achievement and career. From the studies of Katariina Salmela-Aro and colleagues,<sup>39</sup> we know that emotional disengagement predicts poor academic and psychological functioning. Further, emotionally disengaged students are less likely to aspire to higher education and they show lower levels of life satisfaction two years after leaving comprehensive school than emotionally engaged students.

We made similar observations in the Finnish ISCY data, as the disengaged students were less likely to aspire both to the academic track in upper secondary education and to tertiary education than their engaged counterparts.<sup>40</sup> The school engagement profile predicted educational aspirations even when controlling for the gender, family socio-economic status, parental education, and support received from family and student counselling. Table 27.2 shows the results of logistic regression analyses examining the relationship between student’s engagement profile and their aspirations for upper secondary education (GUS) at Grade 9, and GUS attendance after comprehensive education. As seen in Table 27.2, the odds that a student plans to go to GUS were 10 times higher for highly engaged students compared to disengaged ones. Observing the actual GUS attendance, the odds were even higher (OR = 18.15,  $p < 0.001$ ).

According to another Finnish longitudinal study, student engagement—when measured as student participation (including indicators of behavioral engagement) and identification (combining indicators of sense of belonging at school and cognitive engagement)—is both stable and fluctuating throughout comprehensive school and

**Table 27.2** The relationship between student’s engagement profile and aspirations for general upper secondary education (GUS) at grade 9, and GUS attendance after comprehensive education

Engagement profile	Aspired GUS			Attended GUS		
	<i>N</i>	OR	<i>P</i>	<i>N</i>	OR	<i>p</i>
Disengaged	79	1		11	1	
Engaged	539	3.97	<0.001	102	2.29	ns
Highly engaged	256	10.33	<0.001	67	18.15	<0.01
Nagelkerken R <sup>2</sup>		0.23			0.36	

*Note* Binary logistic regression model controlling for gender, SES, and parental education

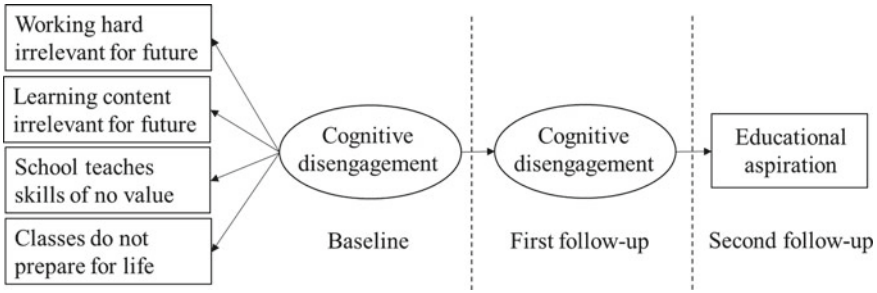
upper secondary education. While participation appeared highly stable from primary to lower secondary school, identification did not.<sup>41</sup> This result implies that students' identification with school depends on the context. However, the conceptualisation of engagement combining both emotional and cognitive aspects does not resolve the question to what extent students' emotional and cognitive engagement independently show stability.

In our ISCY study, the most worrying levels of disengagement were identified at the cognitive level as over one third of the students had negative attitudes toward school and considered schoolwork irrelevant for their life and future (see Table 27.1). This is alarming as exactly this component of engagement forms the basis for meaningful learning; cognitively engaged students are more willing to invest time and effort in their studies, are more likely to be efficient in dealing with study demands, and display more persistence when facing problems.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, cognitive disengagement does not only affect learning outcomes at present, but it is also highly relevant for students' future orientation in a life-span context.<sup>43</sup> As research has shown, students' attitudes towards schooling affect their motivation as well as both aspirations and decisions on whether or not pursue further studies.<sup>44</sup>

To add further insight into the current research on student cognitive disengagement, we applied the longitudinal ISCY data to study both the stability of students' cognitive disengagement and its predictive value regarding educational aspirations. The follow-up data included three measurement points ( $N = 149$ ): the baseline (the last year of comprehensive education), the first follow-up (the first year of upper secondary education) and the second follow-up (the first year after upper secondary education). We examined two questions. First, does student's cognitive disengagement identified at Grade 9 hold across the transition to the first year of upper secondary education? Second, to what extent does cognitive disengagement in upper secondary education predict further educational aspirations? Figure 27.2 depicts the hypothesised associations between the key study variables. The outcome 'educational aspiration' measured adolescents' willingness to attain different kinds of diplomas in the future. These were categorized as 1 = vocational degree at most and 2 = higher education degree.

Cross-sectional and longitudinal confirmatory factor analysis models were applied to study the structure and stability of the cognitive disengagement scale. In doing so, the suggested methodological procedures were followed.<sup>45</sup> To examine how cognitive disengagement predicts adolescents' educational aspirations, a structural equation model with control variables was specified. The statistical analyses were performed using the Mplus statistical package with the missing-data method.<sup>46</sup>

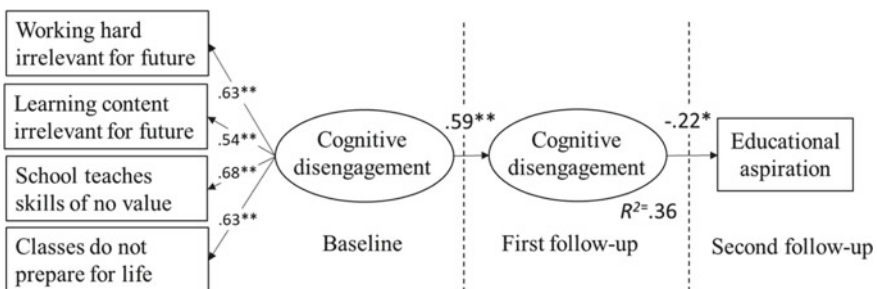
Students' cognitive disengagement showed stability across the major educational transition from comprehensive schooling to voluntary upper secondary education. The estimated stability coefficient for the school irrelevancy factor was 0.59, which indicates relatively strong stability of the construct across the time (Fig. 27.3; see appendix for the precise fit indices for the models and model invariance). This indicates that students who do not find education relevant for their life and future at the end of comprehensive school, most likely find it irrelevant in upper secondary education as well. Looking across comprehensive and upper secondary school and



**Fig. 27.2** Factor models for cognitive disengagement (negative attitudes) and hypothesised associations between the study variables controlling for gender, immigrant background, and socio-economic status

controlling for gender, immigrant background, and SES, students’ cognitive disengagement predicted post upper secondary educational aspirations. Hence, the less students valued school and learning, the lower they aimed with their studies. One path for the controlling variables, namely the one from student SES to educational aspiration, was statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.38, p < 0.001$ ) and in the expected direction: students with higher SES aimed higher in their educational career.<sup>47</sup>

Overall, the majority of Finnish students enjoy school, find learning valuable, and participate in school activities. However, a considerably large proportion of them do not. While the exact frequencies vary across studies depending on the study framework, conceptualization, and methodological choices made,<sup>48</sup> mounting and parallel evidence indicate that a proportion of Finnish students do disengage from school. While in previous studies behavioural disengagement, especially in its serious form of continuous truancy, was rare among Finnish students,<sup>49</sup> other dimensions of disengagement were not. As much as one fifth of the students were classified emotionally and cognitively disengaged. Particularly worrying is that almost one third (30%) of students perceived their schoolwork worthless and irrelevant for future success. Cognitive disengagement was especially accentuated among students with



**Fig. 27.3** SEM model depicting the longitudinal relations among cognitive disengagement and post upper secondary educational aspiration. *Note* All coefficients are standardized and statistically significant; \*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*  $p < 0.05$

low SES (39.3%) and students with disabilities (37.7%). Students in these groups questioned the relevance of school for their life and future.

The longitudinal results showed that negative attitudes towards school and education tend to hold through the transition from the last year of comprehensive education (at age of 15) to the first year of post-comprehensive schooling. Thus, cognitive disengagement is a stable construct that may remain unchanged even across the transition to a new school environment. If students have internalised their negative opinions about school by the end of compulsory education, they most likely hold these opinions across the school contexts. Interestingly, in a previous Finnish study,<sup>50</sup> identification with school (i.e., a hybrid of emotional and cognitive engagement) was found unstable from primary to lower secondary school; that is across the previous transition in students' educational career. Even though the studies differed in the operationalisation of the constructs and, as such, are not comparable, an interesting question remains for future studies: at what point before the end of comprehensive schooling does cognitive disengagement, measured as negative attitudes towards school, take its stable form, and whether the construct holds its stability beyond upper secondary education.

## **Conclusion: Fueling Engagement Through Early Identification of Disengagement and Tailored Interventions to Support Individual Needs**

Generally, school disengagement is a phenomenon that occurs in every school system around the globe. However, international comparative studies pointing out higher-than-average levels of disengagement among Finnish students have exposed this fundamental flaw in the Finnish education system. Drawing on the low dropout rates in the Finnish comprehensive school, even the disengaged students seem to complete school and graduate. This, as such, is a merit for the system. In 2021, the minimum school leaving age in Finland was raised to 18 years and compulsory education was therefore extended to upper secondary education. Although this reform will reduce the interruption of upper secondary education, students who disengage from school may underperform and leave the school with inadequate qualifications. Furthermore, they will leave school without an important asset for the future: the skill to engage in learning, which—in the era of global risks and constant changes—is a prerequisite for success in the labour market and life.

There seems to be a wide variation in Finnish students' school engagement, this makes it insufficient to apply average values for all students to describe the full spectrum of students' school disengagement. Instead, Finnish students may differ in the extent to which they disengage and the aspects of engagement involved when they do so. This diversity of disengagement poses challenges to teachers on how to identify students at risk to disengage early enough and on how to intervene effectively in case of disengagement. Hence, there is a need for a preventive strategy, such as a three-tiered model of supporting student engagement,<sup>51</sup> which involves reaffirming, reconnecting, and reconstructing aspects in engaging students. The reaffirming stage, which aims to reaffirm preventively all students' engagement through a continuous school-wide process, is of special interest. It includes regular risk monitoring amongst all students, which enables an early identification and a timely intervention.

It was surprising that we observed the largest degree of disengagement concerning specifically cognitive disengagement that measured students' opinions about school relevancy. This was somewhat unexpected, because Finnish people traditionally value education highly, and education is widely considered to be one of the cornerstones of the Finnish welfare society.<sup>52</sup> It seems, however, that some of the young people have questioned the intrinsic value of education. In today's society, where even the highest education does not guarantee a stable career, this is understandable. Then again, aiming to increase the intrinsic value of learning and education amongst disengaged students is warranted as the student's sense of school irrelevancy is not only stable but it also affects student outcomes beyond comprehensive schooling. Early identification and intervention in comprehensive schools is a way to tackle disengagement from further education. This can be done by strengthening the functional relevance of the curriculum and programmes of study so that students recognise and appreciate how working hard with their studies can pay off for personal interests and career goals.<sup>53</sup> This is, however, a challenging task under the present policy ideology emphasizing efficiency, accountability, and the individual's right to choose. The results of our study, which show that school disengagement is more prevalent amongst students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and students with disabilities than amongst the students in Finland as a whole, call for different policies. Instead of intensifying competition between individuals, what is needed is policies to promote the inclusion of all students and to pay particular attention to the school engagement of those in the most vulnerable positions in Finnish society.

## Appendix

See Table 27.3.

**Table 27.3** Fit indexes for the CFA and stability models of cognitive disengagement

Model <sup>a</sup>	$\chi^2$	df	<i>p</i>	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR	$\Delta \chi^2$ (scaling corr. for MLR)
<b>Cross-sectional CFA</b>								
Time 1 (n = 1004)	4.07	2	0.130	0.072	0.980	0.941	0.025	
Time 2 (n = 205)	3.99	2	0.136	0.071	0.988	0.964	0.022	
<b>Longitudinal CFA</b>								
Model 1 (n = 203)	38.60	19	0.005	0.071	0.940	0.912	0.052	
Model 2 (n = 203)	40.51	22	0.009	0.064	0.944	0.928	0.060	$\Delta \chi^2(3) =$ 2.03, <i>p</i> = 0.567

<sup>a</sup> Time 1 & Time 2 models: structural invariance; Model 1: configural invariance; Model 2: loading invariance

## Notes

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