

Why Is Student Engagement Important?

There is an essential connection between student engagement and race and culture. The educational context, in which students of color are expected to be successful, operates on the norms and values of the dominant culture, which more often than not differs from the cultures that our students bring with them into the classroom (Noguera, 2000). National data on student achievement indicates that African American and Latino students are on average one year behind their white counterparts by second or third grade, and three to four years behind by twelfth grade (Education Trust, 2003). This gap widens at each grade level, and thus grows increasingly difficult to disrupt. Juel (2004) reported that children falling behind by first grade have only a one in eight chance of ever catching up to grade level. It is therefore no surprise that fewer students of color are graduating from high school and even fewer attend or complete college (Rumberger & Rotermund, 2009).

A closer examination of achievement data clearly links students' engagement level in school with academic performance. Klem and Connell (2004, p.5) write, "Student engagement has been found to be one of the most robust predictors of student achievement and behavior in school, a conclusion which holds regardless of whether students come from families that are relatively advantaged or disadvantaged economically or socially." In order to be engaged and motivated to learn, students need to feel a sense of belonging in their school. When schools provide culturally relevant and culturally responsive instruction, students of color are more likely to experience a greater sense of involvement and belonging. To disrupt patterns of inequity and support students to achieve at their full potential, we must consider the role of engagement in shifting students' experience and investment in school, and therefore the landscape of achievement for African-American and Latino students and English Learners.

What is Engagement?

In the literature on student engagement, researchers use a wide variety of terms to describe a few central concepts related to student engagement. In their review of forty-five such studies, Sinclair, Christenson, Lehr and Anderson (2003, p.11) created a definition that attempted to incorporate key areas of consensus: "...school engagement is a multi-faceted construct that includes affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions". These three components represent distinct but equally important aspects of engagement:

Affective: Student feelings about the classroom and school (e.g. sense of belonging, safety, attachment to teacher, etc.)

Behavioral: Student behavior and effort in the classroom (e.g. attendance, participation, work output, etc.)

Cognitive: Student beliefs about their own competence and perceptions of their teacher's belief in their abilities (e.g. I am capable of learning, my teacher thinks I can learn, etc.)

Using these three categories as guides, it is clear that engaged and disengaged behavior can play out in different ways in the classroom. As Skinner and Belmont (1993, p. 572) point out...

"Engaged students exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks. They show positive emotions during ongoing action, including, enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest". In contrast, disengaged students "are passive, they do not try hard, and give up easily in the face of challenges...they can be bored, depressed, anxious, or even angry...they can be withdrawn from learning opportunities, or even rebellious towards the teacher or other students."

It is equally important to note that compliance and/or silence, especially for English Learners, can indicate disengagement that is often unidentified. The behaviors of disengaged students can easily be misinterpreted; therefore, exploring the three components of engagement is an important in understanding the many reasons students might disengage.

Implications for Teaching

When trying to improve student engagement, we must start out by thinking through a comprehensive strategy for addressing students' cognitive, affective and behavioral needs. Without thinking through each of the domains, we may focus on strategies that only address one area. For example, if we only implement common behavioral strategies such as using name sticks, Think-Pair-Shares, thumbs-up, thumbs-down as a means of student response, we may see limited changes in student engagement because we have not also attended to students' cognitive and affective needs. Through a review of research and our experience in classrooms, we have identified samples of teacher behaviors that positively affect all areas of engagement (see ***Increasing Student Engagement*** tool attached). We encourage school leaders and teachers to use this tool to learn more about teacher practices that can support student engagement across all three domains of engagement, creating an environment that facilitates the transformative change we wish to see in our schools.

References

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