

Student Engagement and Academic Success in Urban Elementary School Classrooms

Erika Bailey

Abstract: This paper examines using student engagement to increase academic success and performance in urban elementary schools. Urban students often fall behind in the achievement gap for a variety of reasons. The goal of this paper is to explain how increasing student engagement in inner-city schools can help to increase academic success. It outlines the different facets of student engagement—cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement, and explains the cyclical nature in which these three pieces come together to comprise student engagement. Taking cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement into consideration while planning and implementing lessons increases overall student engagement. Research-based strategies and suggestions are provided on how to incorporate each of the areas of student engagement to maximize student success.

Introduction

Students who are invested in their own learning experience academic success. For students to learn, they need to be motivated to put in the effort. However, many students in urban elementary schools are not experiencing the level of academic success that their suburban counterparts are achieving. Farrington, Levenstein, and Nagaoka (2013), said that the poor educational outcomes of low-income students “suggest that there is a fundamental disconnect between contemporary schooling and the needs of students in urban schools” (p. 1). As teachers in urban settings, we are tasked with finding and fixing that disconnect and we do this by making learning more meaningful and relevant to the lives of our students. Although this disconnect between home and school makes it more difficult to motivate students, the first step in the process is for teachers to educate themselves on the various facets of student engagement. They can then utilize the information to develop relationships that allows them to learn about their students’ interests and motivations.

Student Engagement and Academic Success

The term “student engagement” has had different definitions in various studies over the years. To ensure clarity throughout this paper, the following definition from Vicki Trowler (2010) will be used:

Student engagement is concerned with the interaction between the time, effort and other relevant resources invested by both students and their institutions intended to optimize the student experience and enhance the learning outcomes and development of students and the performance, and reputation of the institution. (p. 2)

Many different factors contribute to the concept of student engagement. Student engagement does not only deal with students themselves putting forth the ef-

fort and concentrating on work, but also takes their feelings of belonging to school, the values and responsibilities of school, as well as individual motivation to be successful academically (Mustafa, 2016). Student engagement has several different main components: Behavioral, Emotional, and Cognitive (Trowler, 2010). For a student to be fully engaged in their learning experience, all three components must be present and building on each other in a cyclical nature (Trowler, 2010). For instance, for a student to have emotional engagement, they need to feel a sense of belonging in their school and classroom. Once a sense of belonging has been established, students must be taught in a way that motivates them to be cognitively invested in learning. Finally, if students are both cognitively and emotionally engaged, behavioral engagement will follow. When behavioral engagement is achieved, students have the opportunity to take part in what they are learning, thus achieving cognitive and emotional engagement.

Studies have shown that when students are not engaged, they are more likely to have behavioral problems, struggle academically, or even drop out of school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Studies have also verified that the opposite is also true: student engagement is a significant predictor of academic success and performance (Lee, 2014). When students have all three pieces of engagement, it leads to greater chances of academic achievement, which is the over-arching goal of student engagement. Because student engagement increases chances of academic achievement, it can be argued that student engagement is one of the main goals of education. The issue remaining is how urban teachers can achieve this goal when there is a disconnect between traditional contemporary education and the needs of urban students (Farrington, et. al., 2013).

One of the most at-risk populations in education in the United States is our inner-city student population. There is a correlation between inner-city students and low achievement, higher dropout rates, and behavioral issues in the classroom (Ikpeze, 2013). Engaging students throughout the day, through incorporating their interests, may eliminate some of the behavioral issues urban educators face today.

Creating a Sense of Belonging

Urban students often feel a disconnect between school and their home lives, whether it be from a schedule, value, or cultural standpoint. Therefore, it is very important to develop a feeling of belonging when working with inner-city students. As educators, it is our job to bridge the gap between home and school so that students can feel that sense of belonging. Relationships and understandings between students and teachers are crucial to the success of any classroom. This need is even more crucial in urban classrooms where the bulk of teachers are coming from backgrounds outside of the environment that they are working in. Too many times, teachers assume that they know about the lives of their students based on the neighborhood they live in, and often do not get to know their students on an individual basis (Rhodes, 2019). Teachers can work on building relationships with students many ways. One way to building relationships is by getting to know students at the beginning of the school year and continuing throughout the school year. Interest Inventories, “family dinners” and personal storytelling are all ways that can help educators to achieve this.

There are many different strategies for cultivating a sense of belonging in the classroom and the school, one of the most important being building relationships. One way to begin building relationships between students and teachers is to adopt the well-studied concept of culturally responsive teaching. Geneva Gay (2010) refers to culturally responsive teaching as “using cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant and effective for them” (p. 31).

For teachers to become culturally responsive educators, they need to make cultivating relationships a priority before any real instruction can begin. Gay (2010) adds to this notion by giving concrete examples of what teachers can do to achieve these relationships. For instance, taking time for authentic conversation about life has an impact on relationships between urban students and their teachers (Gay, 2010). Rhodes (2019) suggests that using personal storytelling between students and teachers gets students involved in “class because they were able to create a space where their voices were heard and respected” (p. 2).

In taking the time aside from academics to learn about students, teachers create a safe emotional classroom climate (Reyes, 2012). Teachers can do this at the classroom level, but Ikpeze (2013) states that this effort to create community needs to take place at a school-wide level. Schools can build community by incorporating a school-wide morning meeting into their weekly schedule to build school-wide emotional engagement.

Student Engagement and Behavior

As mentioned, behavioral engagement is one of the pieces that makes up student engagement (Trowler, 2010). For students to be fully engaged, they need to be behaviorally compliant. Speaking to the cyclical nature of the components of engagement, the opposite is also true: students that are authentically engaged are behaviorally compliant. Studies have shown that students who are emotionally and cognitively engaged have increased on-task behavior and less disruptive behavior (Prykanowski, 2018). Prykanowski (2018) states that students can be either actively or passively engaged during lessons and the type of lesson, whether it is teacher directed or child-initiated, may have an impact (para. 53). Teacher directed activities are planned by the teacher and often involve listening to the teacher and following a specific set of directions set forth by the teacher. The teacher guides what the students are going to learn. Teacher directed activities require more passive engagement (Prykanowski, 2018). Many upper-elementary and middle school classrooms are set up this way. Child-initiated activities are chosen entirely by the child and are typically more active and independent. An example of this would be choosing a center in Kindergarten, or in upper elementary, choosing a topic of interest and designing a project around it. Child-initiated activities tend to have more active engagement associated with them (Prykanowski, 2018).

Active versus passive engagement depends on student motivation. A person’s motivation drives their behavior (Alkaabi, et al., 2017), and behavior dictates choices, especially when it comes to the elementary school classroom. Students must either be internally or externally motivated (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012), and reasons for motivation are highly personal and vary vastly from one person to the next. Motiva-

tion is a very individual concept, and motives for behavior stem from a person's predispositions based on their environment (Alkaabi et al., 2017). According to Alkaabi (2017), there are four expressions of motivation including behavior, engagement, physiology, and self-report (p. 197). Thus, motivation plays a role in behavior and engagement.

Planning for Engagement

Taking students into consideration during planning also helps to build relationships and increase student engagement and motivation. Teachers need to aim for fewer teacher-directed activities or include one actively student-engaging element in each lesson. An easy way to include a student-initiated piece to any lesson is by incorporating choice. Teachers can plan to include choice into lessons with choice boards for assignments or assessments. Choice boards are usually papers that have multiple assignment or assessment options on them, usually in grid form. Choice boards have suggestions of projects or assignments students can do to show their knowledge on a certain topic. To add another layer of choice, educators can include a “free” space where students have the option to come up with their own creative assignment to show what they have learned.

In addition to choice boards, another way to give students autonomy in the classroom is through project-based (PBL) and inquiry-based learning. In PBL or inquiry-based learning, students work on a self-chosen real-world problem or question to answer. These are typically long-term problems that require students to use and develop critical thinking skills and creativity. At the end of a project, students communicate their results to their class. Students can engage in PBL individually or in a group. In a 2018 study about student motivation and engagement, researchers looked at project based learning and direct teaching and found that both motivation and student engagement levels were higher in project-based learning over direct instruction (Carrabba & Farmer, 2018).

When planning for direct instruction, teachers should consider their students' personal learning styles. An easy way to build emotional engagement at various points in the year is by giving learning style and interest surveys. These surveys can be teacher created or can be found online.

In-Lesson Engagement

“Red Robin!” announces Ms. Smith, signaling the beginning of the science lesson. “Yummmmmmmmm!” responds of Ms. Smith’s 4th grade students, voices quieting to listen to directions. “Today we are going to reread the passage on fossils from yesterday. First, I would like everyone to skim their passages. You will have 45 seconds.” After the allotted 45 seconds the teacher announces, “Time is up! Please turn to your elbow partner and tell them something interesting that you read. Be prepared to share with the class what your partner told you. You have 60 seconds.” Ms. Smith walks around, listening to conversation, providing appropriate feedback. The timer goes off and Ms. Smith asks for partners to volunteer to share what was discussed. “My partner remembered reading about how there are there different types of fossils.” Looking around the room, Ms. Smith notices that many students are giving that response the “me too” hand

signal. “It looks like this is a common fact that many other students discussed, thank you for sharing. Today you will each be assigned a group and a fossil type. Each group will be tasked with rereading the section of the passage about their fossil type, use the rubric to create a poster, and propose a Level 2 question for other group members to answer.” Ms. Smith goes over the rubric and reviews Costa’s Levels of Questioning and the assignment begins.

Keeping students cognitively engaged during lessons is as important as planning for the whole of student engagement. When planning instruction, teachers need to think about making their direct instruction as interactive as possible to increase behavioral, cognitive, and emotional engagement. Using appropriate questioning, productive praise, and varying levels of collaboration (groupings) are all imperative for keeping students engaged during lesson delivery (Gurses et al., 2015).

Ms. Smith’s lesson is an example of what interactive direct instruction should look like. She uses her classroom management techniques to facilitate her lesson. There is no down time, and students understand exactly what is expected of them. Additionally, she utilizes different instructional groupings, provides productive praise, and actively engages her students in questioning—all strategies that promote all facets of student engagement in the classroom.

Productive praise is generally thought of as a classroom management tool. Praise can keep student behavior on-task and refocus off-task behavior. For praise to be productive, it needs to be specific and needs to reinforce the wanted behavior (Floress et al., 2017). Questioning and Inquiry is another necessary tool for keeping students engaged. A model used frequently in schools is Costa’s Levels of Inquiry. Costa’s model is a three-tiered approach. Level one focuses on answers that can be found through text evidence (i.e. Name a character in the story). Level two focuses on answers that can be inferred from the text (i.e. Compare and contrast Character A and Character B). Level three focuses on answers that require students to think beyond the text, such as evaluating a problem a character has or making a prediction (AVID Weekly, n.d.). Finally, utilizing effective groupings can increase peer collaboration, which aids in emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. Collaborative learning is a situation where students work together to achieve a common goal (Case, et. al., 2007). When engaged in collaborative work, students bounce ideas off each other and practice group problem-solving skills, all skills necessary for student engagement.

Conclusion

Urban teachers need to ensure that their students stay emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally engaged to have the best chance at academic success. Teachers can ensure students are emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally engaged by building genuine relationships with students; creating a safe, collaborative, and respectful environment; varying instructional activities; and providing students with a sense of purpose and belonging in their classroom, school, and community.

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About the Author

Erika Bailey graduated from Bowling Green State University with a Bachelor of Science in education in 2014 and went on to complete her Master of Education Degree in early childhood education at the University of Toledo. She is licensed in Ohio and Michigan in preschool through 3rd grade with a grade 4 and 5 generalist endorsement. She currently teaches 4th grade in the Toledo area.