

**Going with the 'Flow':
Teachers' Perspectives About When Things Really Work**

**Angela Dalton, Joyce Holoboff, Chloe Kaniusis,
Shaun Kranenborg, Jessica Sliva**

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Angela Dalton is a grade two teacher in Chinook's Edge School Division. She has been teaching for 19 years.

Joyce Holoboff is a music specialist and grade three teacher in Wolf Creek School Division. She has been teaching for 22 years.

Chloe Kaniusis has been teaching grade four for six years in the Wild Rose School Division.

Shaun Kranenborg has been teaching grades 9 -11 for seven years in Red Deer Public Schools.

Jessica Sliva has been teaching grade one in Red Deer Catholic Schools. She has been teaching for four years.

Abstract

This research studies teachers' experience with the concept of "flow." Flow can be described as a state of being in which one is fully engrossed in the activity. When activities are in "flow," there is a sense of immersion, high energy, joy, and focus. In an analysis of fifteen teachers' reflections of flow experiences, five prominent characteristics emerged: engagement, authentic and meaningful experiences, relationships, learning environment, and flexibility and risk-taking. Recognizing the classroom conditions under which flow may occur could assist teachers in creating effective and engaging learning environments. Our research supports the idea that flow is not only desired but something that can be fostered.

Key Words

flow, learning environment, teacher engagement, authentic tasks

Introduction

In this research study, we asked teachers to describe a time when they experienced flow. According to Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, flow can be summarized as a mental state in which one is fully immersed in an activity with accompanying feelings of focus, involvement, and joy. Flow can be experienced in many aspects of life and our goal was to collect and analyze data of teachers' experiences with flow. From the results, five main characteristics of flow emerged: (1) engagement, (2) authentic and meaningful experiences, (3) relationships, (4) learning environment, and (5) flexibility and risk-taking. Understanding the characteristics in which flow might occur may assist educators in re-creating optimal classroom conditions for its encouragement.

Literature Review

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) defined flow as a mental state of operation where a person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, complete involvement, and joy in the process or activity. In essence, when a person is "in flow" that person is completely absorbed in what one does. Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) focal point for defining *flow experiences* is that these experiences inspire and motivate students to learn. The objectives of flow experiences are clear; feedback is quick, one's skills match one's challenges, concentration is deep, problems are forgotten, control is complete, self-consciousness disappears, one's sense of time is altered, and experience becomes autotelic.

For Csikszentmihalyi, teacher and student flow were separate entities; however, Lloyd & Smith (2006) found teacher flow and student flow to be interdependent. Beard & Hoy (2010) found that flow occurred for elementary teachers when activities became

spontaneous, automatic, and when the teachers “lose conscious awareness of themselves” (p. 452). Whalen & Csikszentmihalyi (1991) reported the findings from a Flow Activities Room (FAR) in an experimental school. They described the frequency of student visits, classroom characteristics, and outlined what could be learned from the experiment. Whalen and Csikszentmihalyi listed six characteristics of this Flow Activities classroom: (1) student work displayed multiple intelligences, (2) the atmosphere was orderly, (3) students felt they had choices and made choices, (4) a range of activities occurred, (5) students were able to concentrate, and (6) students were challenged, but respected rules.

Custodero’s (1999) research on children’s music found that (1) flow was observable in young children’s music classes and that (2) children’s experiences with flow could be affected by the quality of adult involvement. Custodero also concluded that flow allowed children to construct their own musical understandings by using cognitive strategies and that young children used peers and adults in their music educational environment differently.

There is evidence of teachers experiencing flow. For example, Beard and Hoy (2010) studied how elementary teachers experienced flow. Their study of 260 teachers from different school demographics identified nine elements: (1) challenge-skill balance, (2) action-awareness merging, (3) clear goals, (4) clear feedback, (5) concentration, (6) sense of control, (7) loss of self-consciousness, (8) transformation of time, and (9) autotelic experience (that is, the activity is engaged in for its own sake, not for another purpose). Beard and Hoy came to believe that, “The clearest sign of flow is the merging of action and awareness, that is, the degree to which an activity becomes spontaneous and automatic and individuals lose conscious awareness of themselves as they perform a

task such as teaching” (p. 452). When these nine elements were combined with academic optimism, the result was optimal teaching and learning conditions.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover which factors, from the perspective of teachers, contributed to the development and experience of flow in educational settings.

Participants

The participant profile for this study included professional, working educators enrolled in graduate studies. The small sample size was composed of fifteen teachers consisting of approximately 87% females and 13% males. The greatest number of teachers in the participant group (33%) had between 15.1 and 20 years of experience. The remainder of the teachers had 0-5 years (20%), 5.1-10 years (27%), 20.1-25 years (13%) and 25.1-30 years (7%). The participant sample was fairly equal in its distribution of rural (47%) and urban (53%) teachers. The average years of experience was 13.2 for urban and 14.6 for rural teachers. The average years of experience for females was 14.7 years and for males 8 years. Experience was distributed across all teaching levels with 53% of teachers teaching only elementary, 7% only middle/junior high school, and 13% only secondary school. The remaining teachers had mixed experience at one or more levels of teaching with 13% having taught elementary and middle/junior high school and 13% having taught at all levels.

Method

Participants were asked to describe a time in their teaching when they were “in flow.” Specifically, participants were given a weekend to respond to the following prompt:

According to Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, flow is a mental state of operation where the person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, full-involvement, and joy in the process of the activity in which the person is engaged. Flow is characterized by being completely absorbed and “at-one” with what one does. The concept is based upon the theory of positive psychology. Describe a time in your teaching when you were “in flow.” Give details about the experience and note what the experience was like (between 150-200 words).

Prior to responding to this prompt, participants provided demographic data. Google Forms was used to collect this data and organize demographics. This information is outlined in the section titled “Participants.”

To better understand the data participants were giving, all responses were collected from the individual responses, organized into a single sheet, and analyzed on a spreadsheet. This collective review and group discussion generated five main themes. These themes included: (1) engagement, (2) authentic and meaningful tasks, (3) relationships, (4) learning environment, and (5) flexibility and risk-taking. As a group, we thoroughly reviewed and discussed the data as we lifted out our themes. After themes were named, as a group we re-read participants’ responses to seek quotes or

thoughts that supported the five themes collated from the data. The themes were prioritized and ordered based on how frequently each response occurred within the data.

Analysis of Data

As noted, five major themes emerged from the data relating to teachers' experiences with flow. These themes were (1) engagement, (2) authentic and meaningful tasks, (3) relationships, (4) learning environment, and (5) flexibility and risk-taking.

Engagement appeared prominently in almost all the participants' responses. Teachers reported high levels of engagement for themselves as well as their students as they described how flow worked. For example, one teacher noted: "When I am 100% engaged, so are my students." Teachers characterized student participation during flow as being self-motivated, where pupils were asking questions, contributing to discussions and not wanting lessons to end. "Children who normally sit back move into a role and become leaders." These aspects of flow contributed to less disruptions and behaviour issues. Teachers described their own flow moments as being exciting and motivating.

A second element supporting flow conditions occurred when learning tasks were authentic and meaningful. When students relate to or develop meaning from the tasks, "they are excited and love to share what they see." Teachers also described flow moments as being those that connected to real life experiences. Activities such as setting up a polling station or designing a marketable product were given as examples of students in flow.

Relationships were identified as an additional contributing factor to flow. Teachers reported feeling in flow when they were in sync with the individual needs of students. One teacher reflected, “knowing each student on an individual basis and isolating what each one needed made all of our school lives full and meaningful.” Within some schools, the results of flow had a ripple effect, where the learning and relationships extended beyond and between classrooms. In one instance, flow was achieved when high school students were paired with an elementary class in learning Shakespeare. Another example of flow occurred when a classroom re-enactment of a Communist society extended to include the support of other staff members. The learning experience was powerful, and one which students reminisced about years later.

In describing flow, teachers consistently mentioned the importance of the learning environment. One teacher noted, “being in flow will always be when I know I provided the most engaging and supportive environment possible.” Whether it was excitement and curiosity created by a newly constructed storefront or science discovery outdoors, flow was facilitated through an engaging environment. When provided with an authentic and meaningful environment, “the students learn how to become critical thinkers and to learn to ask questions and how to find answers in a professional and safe manner.”

Finally, our research identified flexibility and risk-taking as a fifth hallmark of flow. Teachers recognized that they were in flow when they decided to “take a risk” and scrap the original plan. Flexibility was an important factor in creating flow. As one teacher noted, “I do not ever remember being in that state when it was something I had in my lesson plan,” and “flow was naturally engaging by virtue of the fact that it was student generated and occurred spontaneously.”

Discussion

As teacher researchers, we recognized that students learn best when they are focused and on task. When focus is intensified and student and teacher interest is high, flow may be the result. In education, what works best for students is often what works best for their teachers. Teachers feel their instruction is more effective when they are in flow. The fact that flow is important to both teaching and learning is integral to understanding how students learn best. A key aspect of our research is that flow is not simply a randomly occurring phenomenon in classrooms. Although our data does not support the idea that flow can be artificially created, our findings suggest it is possible to create the conditions that nurture its development. Our research supports the idea that flow is not only desired but something that can be fostered.

If the primary goal of teaching is to ensure students are provided the most effective learning environment possible, then these findings are of importance. Further research studies might consider how educators purposefully create the conditions that promote flow experiences for themselves and their students. Additionally, student perceptions of flow experiences could be examined.

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