

Student Engagement: The Most Powerful Measure of a Good School

Connie Atkinson

Abstract

This article asks the question, "What makes a school good?" Although this question is subjective, and therefore can be answered in a multitude of ways, the most powerful measure of a good school is student engagement. Therefore, it is the responsibility of educators to ensure that students are actively involved in all aspects of their learning. Such a feat can be achieved through the use of relevant lessons and creative strategies that are designed to engage, through the development of personal relationships aimed to cultivate trust, and through the use of effective feedback intended to inform. These strategies all support the belief that students should take primary responsibility for their learning.

Many different measures determine whether a school should be considered good. Community involvement, parental engagement, teacher efficacy, and leadership are typically strong indicators of effectiveness. However, the most powerful measurement of the effectiveness of a school is the level of engagement that students display. For many, the desire to learn is an intrinsic motivation, but there are a number of ways that teachers can provide an extrinsic context for students to be engaged in their learning. Student engagement can be achieved through teaching methods that are designed to invoke critical thinking and deeper understanding, through the purposeful development of teacher-student relationships, and through the use of effective feedback. These strategies work toward the same goal: to engage students in a meaningful way so that they become active participants in all facets of the learning process.

Teaching Strategies and Methods Designed to Engage

Many believe that the main responsibility of teachers is to educate students, or to prepare them for the next stage of their life. However, such a feat is nearly impossible if students do not have the desire to learn. Therefore, a more accurate description of the responsibility of an educator is to engage students in their learning, because "student-centred practice is at the heart . . . of . . . the teaching profession" ("The Future," 2013, p. 16). Most students believe that teachers are in control of what and how they learn, and unfortunately in most cases their assessment is accurate. Teachers who truly want students to be engaged in what they are learning will share some of their control in the classroom, thereby providing students with the opportunity to make decisions about what and how they learn. That is not to say that teachers must give up full control of their classrooms and lessons, but rather find the balance between instructing, facilitating, and activating. Therefore, the primary responsibility of teachers is not to impart knowledge, but rather to encourage students to become involved in their learning. One way to engage students is to make learning fun and interesting for the participants.

People put more effort into, and take more pride in, an activity in which they are invested. Students will make more sense of, and be more engaged in, an activity that interests them, because "knowledge is made meaningful by situating it in an activity that relates to the context or culture of the participants" (Conner, 2013, p. 476). With this knowledge in hand, teachers will find ways to motivate students, and to "create an environment in which students will want to gain the knowledge presented in the classroom" (Cirimo, 2014, p. 12). The most logical way to accomplish this challenge is to give students the context wherein they learn about what interests them. This may seem like a utopian ideal, but there are ways to achieve this goal if teachers become facilitators and activators of what is being taught in the classroom, as opposed to the gatekeepers of information. Such a scenario raises an important question: if students are in

control of their learning, how then do teachers ensure that students are meeting the curricular outcomes? Following the curriculum, thereby ensuring that all students have the opportunity to meet the outcomes, is not optional for educators. It is a clear expectation, and there is very little flexibility unless students are on a modified academic program. Therefore, educators who share control of learning with their students must do so in a creative and purposeful way.

A number of teaching practices lend themselves to student engagement. Using prompts and compelling questions to stimulate critical thinking is one way in which teachers can encourage students to take ownership of their learning. A constructivist approach, wherein connecting new knowledge to previously learned knowledge to enhance students' understanding, is another method that can be used (Conner, 2013). By making this connection in an explicit and meaningful way, students will realize that they have a base of knowledge to draw from, which will make them more confident learners. In a constructivist classroom, "teachers are expected to provide students with a variety of experiences from which learning is constructed" (Conner, 2013, p. 474). Teachers who stimulate critical thinking, build on prior knowledge, and offer learners the opportunity to learn in a variety of ways will successfully engage their students.

Cooperative learning is another strategy that can be used to engage students. This teaching practice relates back to the idea of making learning fun and interesting, because learning is more enjoyable and more meaningful when students have the opportunity to share their experiences with their peers (What Works Clearinghouse, 2013). Such a strategy requires teachers to create opportunities for students to interact with each other in a meaningful way. One may think that in this context the teacher would have minimal control over what is happening in the classroom; however, the opposite is true. Effective cooperative learning requires the teacher to be more organized and more involved in the learning process, in order to ensure that students are getting the most out of their experience. Cooperative learning also encourages critical thinking and evaluative skills, both of which facilitate deeper understanding (Harris, 2010). Used correctly, cooperative learning is a powerful teaching method that can be used to engage students.

Metacognitive awareness is another strategic teaching practice. In other words, teachers should provide students with the opportunity to become aware of how they learn. This awareness is a key component of student engagement because "it is a process whereby learners purposefully monitor and regulate their own learning needs" (Conner, 2013, p. 477). Students who understand the way in which the learning process works will be engaged in their learning by default, because they will become more involved in the process. Teachers who offer students a variety of learning opportunities, and who use questioning, constructivist strategies, cooperative learning, and metacognitive awareness, will be effective in engaging their students, who will thereby become active participants in the process of learning.

Teacher-Student Relationships

Another important facet of student engagement is building strong teacher-student relationships both inside and outside the classroom. The learning process is somewhat risky because students often have to step outside of their comfort zone when participating in the process. Therefore, teachers need to spend time developing trust in their relationships with students (Hung, 2013). If students feel secure, then they will become more willing to participate in classroom activities. The first step in building a trusting relationship with students is taking the time to learn about them. This may seem like an unrealistic expectation, especially for high school teachers, who may see more than a hundred students in a single day. However, becoming familiar with students does not have to be a one-on-one conversation. It can be accomplished through checklists, journal entries, whole-class discussions, or any other creative strategy that a teacher can think of to learn personal information about individual students. Becoming familiar with students serves two distinct purposes: (1) it shows students that their

teachers have an interest in who they are, and (2) it provides teachers with insight that can be used to plan engaging lessons and activities based on the interests of the participants.

Finding the right balance between teacher control in the classroom and teacher-student interactions is another vital component of building teacher-student relationships. Teachers and students alike prefer a classroom where there is a high degree of control, and where teachers and students interact on regular basis (Veldman, van Tartwijk, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2013), because “there is more engagement, and more respect of self and others” (Hattie, 2010, p. 119). As a result, students tend to achieve better in these classrooms as opposed to classrooms wherein either control is lacking or teachers and students have minimal opportunities for interaction. In such an environment, teachers create “democratic learning environments where students become accustomed to being treated as competent and able individuals” (Bartolomé, 2009, p. 342). By finding the balance between control and interaction in the classroom, teachers will not only develop positive relationships with their students, but they will also provide the best learning environment for them.

Although a teacher-student relationship typically begins in the classroom, it should not remain within the confines of those four walls. Children are intuitive; if they perceive that teachers want to get to know them only because the teachers want them to perform well in school, then students are less likely to believe in or put trust in those teachers. Teachers have a number of opportunities on a daily basis wherein they can authenticate their relationships with their students. Greeting students with a smile when they enter the school, spearheading a conversation in the hallway, and having an open-door policy are a few simple ways to solidify these relationships. Coaching or leading extra-curricular activities is another way to further teacher-student relationships. Students perceive teachers who lead after-school programs more favourably, and are therefore more likely to be connected to the school (Massoni, 2011), “because high-quality extra-curricular activities build relationships between students and the competent, responsive adults who supervise such activities” (Holloway, 2002, p. 80). Leading an extra-curricular activity and taking the time to interact with students outside of the classroom are wonderful ways for teachers to strengthen their student relationships and increase student trust. This trust will transfer into the classroom and students will thereby be more engaged in the learning process.

Feedback as a Tool of Engagement

Using effective feedback is another way in which teachers can engage students in their learning. The purpose of feedback is to help students make improvements, thereby deepening their understanding (Van den Bergh, Ros, & Beijaard, 2013). In order for feedback to be effective, it must have a clear and attainable goal, and be specific, timely, and consistent (Wiggins, 2012). Providing feedback as formative assessment, as opposed to a numerical score or letter grade, is time consuming. However, it is time well spent, because it will not only inform students about what they need to do, but it can also advise teachers about deficits of skills or understanding, and teachers can then use this information to plan accordingly (Fisher & Fry, 2012). Feedback should be not only teacher directed, but also a part of what students do. When engaged in the process of learning, it is natural for students to provide feedback to teachers through questioning. Teachers should attend to these questions and other forms of feedback from students, because “when teachers seek, or at least are open to, feedback from students . . . then learning can be synchronized and powerful” (Hattie, 2010, p. 173). Therefore, giving effective feedback to students, and accepting feedback from students, will increase their level of engagement.

Conclusion

Using a variety of teaching strategies and methods, developing and authenticating teacher-student relationships, and providing effective feedback all serve the purpose of engaging

students in the learning process. This purposeful objective of engaging students is best practice because the learning is student-centred with the intention of facilitating a deeper understanding. It is not only what teachers do in the classroom, but also the way that teachers feel toward their students that is at the heart of student engagement. Although a number of facets, such as community involvement, parental engagement, leadership, and teacher efficacy may be used to determine whether a school is good, the most representative, and therefore the most powerful, measure of a good school is student engagement. Thus, it is the responsibility of educators to ensure that students are not learning in a superficial way, but rather are engaged in the process of learning. This practice will facilitate a deeper understanding in students, who will then become active participants who are invested in their learning.

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About the Author

Connie Atkinson is enthused and honoured to be in Brandon University's northern cohort of educators who are working toward their master's degrees. She is in the curriculum and instruction stream with a focus on literacy. Connie currently works in a K-12 community school in Creighton, Saskatchewan, where she oversees the Learning Assistance Program, coordinates distance-learning courses for high school students, and teaches one section of grade 8 ELA.