

**ERIC JENSEN**

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ENGAGING  
STUDENTS WITH  
**poverty**  
IN MIND

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES  
FOR RAISING ACHIEVEMENT



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Acknowledgments ..... v  
Preface .....vii  
Introduction ..... 1  
1. The Seven Engagement Factors ..... 7  
2. The Rules for Engagement ..... 20  
3. Engage for Positive Climate ..... 34  
4. Engage to Build Cognitive Capacity ..... 52  
5. Engage for Motivation and Effort ..... 71  
6. Engage for Deep Understanding ..... 92  
7. Engage for Energy and Focus ..... 111  
8. How to Automate Engagement ..... 131  
9. “Now What?”: Meeting the Challenge of Implementation ..... 156  
References ..... 177  
Index ..... 190  
About the Author ..... 196

## Introduction

The academic record of students who live in poverty is not good. In the United States, if you are poor, your odds of graduating are lower than are those of a middle-income student. If you are also Hispanic or black, your odds just dropped again. Half of all poor students of color drop out of school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Seventy percent of all children who do not graduate from high school have spent at least a year living in poverty (Hernandez, 2012). In 2009, the dropout rate of students living in low-income families was about five times greater than the rate of students from high-income families: 7.4 percent versus 1.4 percent (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & KewalRamani, 2011).

This is not a failure within the students. There are no poor students with deficits; there are only broken schools that need fixing. There are no failing students; there are only schools that are failing our students. There are no unmotivated students; there are only teachers whose classrooms are frightfully boring, uncaring, or irrelevant. Such classrooms fail to engage students enough to be able to meet their needs. If you think these are outrageous statements, this book is for you. I'll show you the evidence and share the success stories.

### Engagement Matters

Engagement shows up as a vital achievement factor in most studies, although it's not always explicitly called *engagement*; sometimes it's

“disguised” as feedback, cooperative learning, project learning, or interactive teaching (Hattie, 2008). The correlation between student engagement and achievement is consistently strong and significant: research shows that for every 2 percent disengagement rises, pass rates on high-stakes tests drop by 1 percent (Valentine & Collins, 2011).

Students love being engaged, and they value engagement *very* highly (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008). Engagement is especially important for low-socioeconomic-status (SES) students. In their study of more than 1,800 students living in poverty, Finn and Rock (1997) found that school engagement was a key factor in whether students stayed in school.

Unfortunately, students are far less engaged than we think (Marks, 2000). In a survey (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007) of 81,000 U.S. high school students, fewer than 2 percent of respondents said that they were never bored. More than 30 percent of respondents claimed that they did not interact with their teachers on a daily basis. An overwhelming 75 percent of respondents said that they were bored because the material they were taught wasn't interesting. Seventy-five percent also indicated that they went to school only to earn a diploma and get out. Not surprisingly, these same students reported spending very little time on homework.

The lack of engagement cited in this study is reflected in other research. Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, and Shernoff (2003) reported that the average high school student spends over 25 percent of the entire day slumped in his or her chair in a state of apathy. Another study (Pianta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007) found that despite students' overwhelming preference for group activities, 5th graders, on average, spent 91 percent of their time either working alone or listening to a teacher, with less than 5 percent of their time spent engaging in group learning activities. In fact, teachers spent over 20 percent of instruction time telling students how to manage materials or time. More critically, children from poverty had only a 10 percent likelihood to experience highly engaging, quality instruction across multiple grades. The authors of this study referred to their findings of the nature and quality of learning opportunities in U.S. elementary classrooms today as “sobering.”

These data speak to a significant problem in schools. To get kids to graduate, we need to keep them in school. To keep them in school, we need to

make our classrooms relevant, engaging, and full of affirming relationships. If your students are not engaged, it is time to upgrade your skill set and, possibly, your attitudes about students. Students do not magically become more interested and engaged every year they attend school unless *you* get better each year, too.

## A Note About Generalizations

The strategies in this book address seven factors that are crucial to student engagement and that are strongly tied to socioeconomic status. In my 2009 book *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, I cited more than 200 high-quality, peer-reviewed studies showing typical differences between low-SES and high-SES students. I introduced these differences in an attempt to help teachers understand the deep effects of poverty and to bolster their efforts to help students succeed. Some may believe that highlighting the differences between those who grow up poor and those who grow up in middle- or upper-income homes is classist. That is patently false; classism occurs when people promote policies that benefit one class *at the expense* of another.

Of course, it is important to keep in mind that socioeconomic classes are not homogeneous. There are no “average poor people” any more than there are “average middle-class people.” A powerful quality of the human brain is to learn from experiences and generalize to aid in subsequent decision making. For example, if you grew up poor and “made it” to the middle class, you might generalize that what worked for you should work for others struggling to advance in socioeconomic status. If the only low-income people you knew were abusing drugs and neglecting their children, you may generalize that poor people are “broken.” But it’s important to remember that your own world is just a grain of sand on a beach of experiences. Do not assume that your individual experiences are representative of everyone else’s. There are loving, joyful families that are poor, just as there are angry, small-minded families that are wealthy.

That said, generalizations are occasionally useful. When the research is compelling, I do generalize. I intend these generalizations to sketch a broad picture of what goes on inside the lives of people living in poverty. Although acknowledging the differences between low-SES and high-SES students

may be uncomfortable, we need to accept the fact that there are relevant differences among our students. Understanding this background and the behaviors that stem from it will help you better engage low-SES students in the classroom. If all teachers needed to do to succeed with students who live in poverty was to use the same strategies they already use with middle- and upper-income students, there would be far less of an achievement gap. Instead of fixating on politics or semantics, we need to stay focused on the goal of helping kids graduate and become productive citizens.

## Time for a Change

We need to face reality: the same old mind-sets and strategies are not working. It's time for a change. Over the years, I have visited numerous schools with high-poverty populations. Many of you work in schools like these, under difficult circumstances, and I empathize with you. But when you share your problems with me, my response will always be, "So what are you going to do differently tomorrow?" Every day, staff members at high-poverty schools around the world continue to do the same thing and vainly hope for a miracle that will never come. We have to make our own miracles.

In a recent e-mail to me, a principal wrote, "We did a book study on *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, and our scores are still the same. What happened?" If boosting student achievement were as easy as reading a book, every student's scores would be through the roof. It takes sustained commitment to ensure that every student succeeds. Until you make your school the best part of a student's day, you will struggle with student attendance, achievement, and graduation rates. Having a high-achieving school is no accident. It is the result of purposeful, engaged teaching over time.

That's where this book comes in. In *Teaching with Poverty in Mind*, I advocated student engagement as a core strategy to help students of low socioeconomic status succeed, but I had limited space to delve deep into engagement strategies. The purpose of this book is to fill in the gaps—to provide the rationale behind engagement, generate more ideas, and build the attitudes to succeed with students who live in poverty. This book is a "no excuses" resource that will get you on the path toward making good things

happen every single day. If students do not come up and thank you for a great class, this book is for you.

Let's walk through how this book can help change the lives of everyone in your school, staff members and students alike.

## An Overview of the Book

Chapters 1 and 2 of this book lay the groundwork of the strategies that follow. Chapter 1 reveals seven factors that are crucial to student engagement and that are strongly tied to socioeconomic status. These engagement factors form the rationale behind the specific strategies I advocate and discuss throughout the book. Chapter 2 shares the rules for engagement that teachers are usually never taught but that are essential for success.

Chapters 3 through 7 get into the nitty-gritty of engaging students. Chapter 3 explains how to create a high-energy, engaging, and positive class climate that fosters success every day. Chapter 4 focuses on building cognitive capacity through engagement. Chapter 5 shows you how to build excitement for greater student motivation and effort. Chapter 6 focuses on ways to build a deep, sustained understanding of the content in students' brains. Chapter 7 provides engagement strategies to elevate both energy and focus in your classroom.

Chapters 8 and 9 take a broader view. Chapter 8 empowers you with strategies to automate engagement in your classroom and school, and Chapter 9 prompts you to look forward and plan how you will implement the actions laid out in this book.

An important note: although the first two chapters of this book focus intensely on the seven engagement factors and why the engagement strategies in this book are especially crucial for low-SES students, the remaining chapters often discuss engagement in broader terms. They do not explain in depth how each strategy helps students who live in poverty. This is intentional. Although this book is titled *Engaging Students with Poverty in Mind*, it could just as easily be titled *An Expert Teacher's Guide to Mastering Engagement*. The mind-sets and the strategies in this book will work for every single student—rich, middle-income, or poor—and they can be used by teachers across all grade levels and content areas. As my description

of my childhood in the Preface indicates, not all students who grow up in adverse circumstances or are disengaged with school are poor. *If you teach, you will find something that applies to you and your work in this book.* It's just that this book will give you an even greater return on your investment with students who live in poverty.

Experiencing adverse circumstances as a child can shape a person's entire life. I know this personally, and maybe you do, too. This book is in your hands because engagement is the crucial factor that combats these circumstances and helps keep kids in school and on the path toward success.

This book has been a joy to write, and I hope you find it a joy to read and implement. Let's all work together to make both your work and your school *way* more engaging. When we do, everybody will win. Are you game?

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