

Classroom Insights from Educational Psychology

EIGHT OF MYTHS STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT

Creating Classrooms of Deep Learning

Jennifer A. Fredricks

Joint Publication



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Introduction

DISENGAGEMENT IN EVERY CLASSROOM

Student disengagement is one of the biggest challenges teachers face each day in their classrooms. This disengagement can take many forms, including lack of participation and effort, acting out and disrupting class, disaffection and withdrawal, and failure to invest deeply in the academic content (e.g., not completing homework, not asking questions). Some educators have erroneously assumed that disengagement is just a problem of low-performing schools and does not apply to their classrooms. However, every school, regardless of its level, location, and demographic characteristics, has students who are disengaged. Recent evidence from national datasets in the United States indicates that as many as 40 percent to 60 percent of students are showing signs of disengagement (Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbush, 1996; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Nationwide, rates of disengagement are higher among males, youths from an ethnic group other than white or Asian, youths from lower socioeconomic status households, and youths in special education (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). The reality is that students often view academics as boring and having little meaning in their lives. Many go through the motions and only do what is required. Although these students are on-task, or at least appear to be, they are not fully engaged and deeply invested in learning.

Student engagement is a complex but achievable goal for every teacher. This book presents a multidimensional construct of engagement that includes student behavior, emotion, and cognition. The book differs from other “quick guides to engagement” by arguing that it is necessary to consider all three of these

dimensions to truly reach the deeper levels of learning needed for success in today's schools. Many states have adopted the Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards, which are designed to help students develop the knowledge and higher-order thinking skills necessary to be successful in college and high-skilled careers. This book will help K-12 teachers create the kind of environments of deep learning and engagement that are necessary to meet these new standards. Throughout this book, elementary, middle level, and high school teachers share their approaches for engaging students in a variety of ways that are supported by the research literature.

What's so important about engagement? There are several reasons why teachers at all levels should be concerned about the high levels of disengagement occurring in many classrooms. Increasing engagement is seen by both educators and policymakers as the key to addressing problems of low achievement, high levels of student boredom and alienation, and high dropout rates. For many students, dropping out of high school is the last step in a long process during which they become disengaged from school (Rumberger, 2011). Recent U.S. national reports estimate that every school day about 7,000 students decide to drop out of high school, resulting in a total of 1.2 million students dropping out each year (NEAP, 2009). These observations are troubling because youths need to be actively involved in school to acquire the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed in society and to be ready for college and careers. The consequences of disengagement are especially severe for low-income and African American, Hispanic, and Native American students. They are less likely to graduate from high school and face more limited employment prospects, which increases their risk for poverty, poor health, and involvement in the criminal justice system (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004).

Prior research has shown that engagement is a strong predictor of achievement-related outcomes. When students have higher engagement, they have higher grades, score better on standardized tests, and are more likely to finish high school and go on to college (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). For students to succeed in today's increasingly global and complex economy and become career and college ready, they need to be able to

think critically and solve cognitively complex problems. Students who just go through the motions but are not emotionally and cognitively engaged will not develop the higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills that will be necessary to compete for the jobs of the future.

Unfortunately, there is evidence that students' engagement steadily declines over the course of school. Moreover, prior research shows that many school practices are actually contributing to this decline over time (Fredricks et al., 2004). The decline begins as early as kindergarten and increases significantly over the transitions to middle and high school. It is most severe for boys, African American and Hispanic youths, and children from lower socioeconomic status households. Watching any young child play, it is clear that they are naturally curious and want to learn and explore. However, something happens when children enter school to dampen this natural interest in learning. This book will explore some of the factors that are responsible for this decline in engagement and outline practical, research-based strategies that teachers can use to create more engaging classroom environments where deep learning occurs.

How can student engagement be increased? A growing body of research shows that it is possible to increase engagement in schools by making changes to the social and instructional environment (Fredricks et al., 2004). Engagement is presumed to be malleable and responsive to changes in the environment. In fact, increasing engagement has been the central goal of many school improvement efforts, especially at the secondary level (National Research Council, 2004). Focusing on engagement as an explanatory variable for achievement and school completion offers more insight into intervention and prevention strategies than does focusing on unalterable demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Although teachers cannot change the innate characteristics of their students, they can change the classroom environment. A student's engagement depends on the opportunities a teacher provides for that student to be engaged. It is clear from the intervention literature that teachers do have control and do play a powerful role in creating environments in which deep learning and engagement can take place.

How This Book Is Different Than Other Books on Engagement

Many books have been written on how to increase engagement. Why should you read this book, and how is it different from these other texts? First, the author is one of the leading researchers in the field of engagement and motivation. She was one of the first to write about how engagement needs to be conceptualized as a multidimensional idea that includes behavior, emotion, and cognition. Many other texts simply equate engagement with on-task behavior, which neglects the emotional and cognitive dimensions that are so critical for deeper learning and achievement. Second, other books tend to emphasize classroom management techniques as the primary means for increasing engagement. This book also considers how instructional tasks, teacher-student relations, and peer dynamics help to create a culture of engagement in the classroom. Third, many of these other books present a simplistic list of strategies for increasing engagement in the short term, such as adding a fun activity or a hands-on task. This book acknowledges that there are no quick fixes or silver bullets to achieve full engagement. Rather, continuous efforts in creating a culture of engagement using research-based findings will result in powerful long-term changes to student engagement in every classroom. Finally, this book emphasizes that educators need to understand how student engagement fits within the broader context of a child's day and acknowledge the role that out-of-school time and families play in shaping engagement. Most other books neglect the reality that these factors affect what happens in the classroom.

Organization of the Book

The goal of this book is to expose both prospective and practicing K-12 educators to current advances in research on student engagement and to discuss implications for classroom practice. Readers will learn how to apply strategies that are supported by current research to help them reflect on and create more engaging classroom contexts where deep learning can take place. Examples will be provided for different age groups and content areas, as will ideas that are relevant to all ages and subject domains. In sections entitled *Engagement in*

Practice, three educators who teach in ethnically and economically diverse schools describe the strategies that they or their colleagues have used to increase engagement in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms.

Each chapter will describe an educational misconception and use research-based evidence to burst this myth. Hypothetical student cases are threaded throughout the text to illustrate the causes and consequences of disengagement and ways to improve engagement in the classroom. These cases will remind teachers of students they have either taught or observe daily in their classroom. Extensive opportunities for teachers to self-reflect through *Stop and Reflect* questions and *Text-to-Practice Exercises* are also provided in each chapter. These questions and exercises are designed to help readers connect the concepts to real-life examples and try some new approaches. *Key Terms and Concepts* are provided at the end of each chapter to enhance comprehension. Finally, each chapter includes a list of additional books and Web sites that educators can use to further their knowledge and understanding of student engagement.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1

MYTH 1: It's Easy to Tell Who Is Engaged: What Is Engagement and How Can I Assess It in My Classroom?

The first chapter introduces a multidimensional view of engagement that includes behavior, emotion, and cognition. Research evidence is provided to counter the myth that it is easy to tell which students are engaged by just observing their on-task behavior and compliance. Although these behaviors are important components of engagement, the greatest achievement and learning outcomes occur when students rank high on all three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Educators can make more valid decisions about student engagement by collecting and evaluating data. Therefore, the chapter discusses why it is important and beneficial to assess engagement in the classroom. A variety of methods to assess engagement, including student self-reports, teacher ratings, observational measures, walkthroughs, and collecting data on early warning signs, are presented.