

Student Engagement: What it looks like and how it can be achieved

Regardless of where in the world you teach, keeping students engaged in the classroom is an issue that all educators have struggled with. Today especially, teachers are competing with text messages, game apps, and social media for their students' attention. These distractions occupy young active brains but leave little room for them to stop and engage in learning. Although it is difficult to define what engagement means, it is recognized to be fundamentally important in promoting achievement. As a result, educators must find ways to teach that allow students' to enjoy what they are learning and feel excited to come to school.



In a literature review titled, “Student Engagement in the Middle Years of Schooling” published by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, three very important research questions are addressed. Although the review addresses middle years of schooling, all three of the questions draw back to the universal issue of disengagement and decreased learning in any classroom. This handout summarizes the key points in the literature review.

Research Question #1

In terms of learning and achievement outcomes for students, what are the key elements of student engagement?

Due to the term ‘engagement’ being hard to define, many sources have their own way of describing what it looks like. For example, psychology literature recognizes motivation, attitudes, and thinking as precursors to learning, but sociology literature concentrates on how wellbeing and belonging fosters engagement. The following features of engagement recurred most frequently in the research for this literature review:

- 1) connectedness/sense of belonging to school
- 2) sense of agency
- 3) involvement, effort, commitment, and concentration
- 4) motivation and interest in learning

- 5) sense of self-efficacy
- 6) orientation to achievement and performance
- 7) self-regulatory processes and skills

This list is comprised of processes that contribute *towards* engagement. For example, if a student feels connected in some way to their classroom or school then they will feel more engaged in their learning.



Source: Clip Art Hut

It is important to understand the difference between a highly engaged student and a poorly engaged student. Feeling connected to the school, teachers, and peers, and showing commitment to learning characterize being highly engaged. However, being poorly engaged is not necessarily an absence of the features of being highly engaged. According to the literature review, poorly engaged students do not lack agency, they choose not to/or are not able to be agentic. Similarly, they do not lack an orientation to achieve; rather they are focused on performing the task so that they can get it out of the way. These are important points to consider when building lesson plans and finding ways to make learning enjoyable for all students.

Research Question #2

How are various elements of student engagement linked to student learning and achievement?

Over time, students become less engaged in aspects of their learning at school and more critical about some of the teaching they were experiencing. This finding from a recent study illustrates how rules and expectations imposed on students by others and themselves (including teachers and parents) influences engagement in learning. According to the literature review, the source of students' increased disengagement was: "work that was at an inappropriate level of difficulty, finding subject content irrelevant or uninteresting." Some suggestions for teachers that the authors of the review made were: a) providing students with work that is at a suitable level of individual challenge, b) providing subject material that takes account of

students' learning interests, and c) ensuring that students are provided with orderly learning environments that support effective learning.

The relationship a student has with their teacher is very strongly linked to promoting wellbeing. Through relationships, students are better able to learn about themselves, their beliefs, their orientations to learning, their values, and can even receive help and emotional support in their learning.



Source: Clip Art Hut

As mentioned above, youth today are connected to each other through many mediums. They text, tweet, and Facebook message each other whenever they like. Adolescence is characterized by peer influences becoming increasingly more important in the lives of youth. Research suggests that the peer group is an important context for adolescents to develop their beliefs and behaviours, and that peer groups are often comprised of similar characteristics. Through this peer group, adolescents develop a positive sense of belonging and this provides a strong protective identity, especially for at risk adolescents.

The literature review discusses how academic learning done in a collaborative manner (allowing students to work together) can give students opportunities to “justify, evaluate, and refine their ideas: to evaluate other possibilities; and to give and receive help.” Through encouraging this interaction, teachers are supporting students to develop cognitive tools and reflective behaviour that equips them well to learn and achieve.

Another important aspect of student learning and achievement is goal setting. Goals influence the effort students put into learning tasks and direct the focus for future action. Teachers can encourage students to create goals that are achievable and worthwhile. It is important that the goals are not too unattainable that they impact on self-confidence and self-efficacy. Feedback from teachers goes hand-in-hand with goal setting, as effort and investment in tasks is much higher where there is clear feedback about progress towards achieving goals.



Source: Creative Commons

Research Question #3

What promotes and supports student engagement for improved learning and achievement?

This section of the literature review explores a range of principles and classroom strategies that teachers can use to organize their teaching and learning programmes to have a positive impact on student. Four key approaches for fostering students' engagement in learning are addressed:

- A) *Nurturing trusting relationships*
- B) *Engaging students in fun learning activities*
- C) *Making learning meaningful*
- D) *Enabling students to learn better and helping them take responsibility for their learning*

All in all, the issue of student engagement is one that can only be solved if teachers are educated on how to make learning more rewarding for all their students. This literature review compiled by the New Zealand Ministry of Education provides helpful insight on how teachers can achieve just that. In conclusion, classrooms in which students feel comfortable asking questions, are expected to do their best, where instruction is challenging, and where specific feedback is given to help students with their current learning, are less likely to have bored and disengaged students. Furthermore, encouraging students to set goals, make choices in their learning, experiment with new ideas, and self-regulate their learning will enhance their engagement and achievement.



Source: C. H. A. P. H. O. T.

To read more on the topics covered in this literature review, the full research and evaluation can be downloaded at www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications.

Reference: Gibbs, R. & Poskitt, J. *Student engagement in the Middle Years of Schooling (Years 7-10): A Literature Review*. Ministry of Education, New Zealand. 2010.