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Increasing Student Engagement in Secondary Classrooms

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Strategies to Increase Student Engagement in Secondary Education

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In my starred paper, I want to examine how different strategies and methods of instruction can affect student engagement for secondary students. A problem I notice more frequently after being out of education for 18 years is student lack of focus; specifically, distraction by their devices and cell phones. I want to focus on instructor attitudes, techniques, and strategies that increase student engagement and lead them to keep their devices put away or use them for a stated instructional purpose, rather than distracting themselves with social media during class. I also want to show how increasing engagement levels relate to higher student achievement. Because I teach grades 10-12 at a senior high school I am specifically interested in secondary Family and Consumer Science students and instructional strategies that would work for them. I was also inspired this summer by reading Burgess (2012) which showcases many specific ways to increase student engagement.

I am interested in increasing student engagement because I think that it is already a strength of mine, and I like to play to my strengths. I also think that since I teach only electives, I already have students who are interested, at least in the general topics we cover in my courses. What is disturbing to me, however, it is that often, when given time to work on assignments in class, students do what I call “self-distract,” choosing to go on social media if given the opportunity to be on a device; for instance, for a class assignment. I want to develop stronger methods of increasing student engagement so that students will, when given time to work on assignments in class, remain focused on the assignment because they are so deeply engaged in the topic and the instruction.

Increasing student engagement will impact my teaching because when my students are deeply engaged, I am deeply happy. Buechner (1973) stated, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” This is why I teach and why I returned to teaching after 13 years of sales. When my students are happily engaged, I, too, am at my happiest and feel empowered to continue, despite struggles which inevitably occur. I also know from my literature review, that student engagement increases student achievement and I am interested in improving both. To inform my future curricular improvements and the teaching methodology I use, is the purpose of this research.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to answer these questions:

1. How can curriculum design increase student engagement?
2. What best practices increase student engagement?

Focus of the Paper

This paper examines literature to define what is meant by student engagement and examines how curriculum design and teacher practices contribute to increased student engagement. In my search for articles, which support this research, I used EBSCO. I used these descriptors: “secondary education,” “student engagement,” and “teaching practices.” I also used “relationships,” after reading initial articles which deemed student-teacher relationships important when considering student engagement. When choosing resources, I read through them to make sure the findings related to increasing student engagement of secondary students, as many articles applied mostly to elementary students. There were different limitations to each study, as none of them applied directly to my content matter and many of the articles were reporting a single teacher’s research on their own classroom levels of engagement.

Rationale

My goal is to create curriculum and use teaching strategies which drive student levels of both engagement and achievement higher. When research suggests that relationships drive engagement, I can make it a point to create strong teacher-student relationships. When ideas implemented and written about by other educators show promise for increasing levels of student engagement, I can use these same methods as I revise curriculum and change my own teaching methods. My hope is to apply the information from researching this starred paper in my classroom, increasing levels of engagement and achievement.

Harbour, Evanovich, Sweigart, and Hughes (2015), in their review of 55 pieces of previous empirical research, supported the premise that effective teacher practices contribute to higher levels of student engagement, and investigated several ways for teachers to foster student engagement. Harbour et al. stated that although research findings vary, all findings support the following: teachers who use more modeling and “think alouds,” offer more opportunities for student response, and more feedback, particularly positive feedback, increases student engagement. Teachers can manage content in ways that promote student engagement, according to Corso, Bundick, Quaglia, and Haywood (2013). Content that involves significant events in pop culture is relevant to students’ future goals, creates a sense of competent academic self-concept, (offers opportunities for success), and involves meaningful work with real world applications while allowing students to share with peers, are all contributors to higher levels of student engagement.

Terminology

For the purpose of this paper, terms are defined as follows:

- **Student Engagement:** Research describes three forms of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, all interrelated. Behavioral engagement includes actions such as raising a hand, responding to the teacher, and showing attention to a teacher or assignments. Emotional engagement is described as students' affective reactions to peers, teachers, and school. Cognitive engagement includes students' levels of effort, investment in learning, and willingness to use complex learning strategies to both master and comprehend course materials (Harbour et al., 2015).
- **Modeling:** the practice of teachers demonstrating a desired skill or behavior while describing their actions and decisions aloud (think aloud).
- **OTRs:** offering students opportunities to respond.
- **Autonomy Supported Behavior:** Examples of autonomy supportive behavior for teachers include finding ways to include student interests, choices, preferences, curiosity, or sense of challenge in lessons.
- **SEC (Student Engagement Core):** teacher, student, and content classroom interactions which impact engagement. Teacher practices which impact engagement in positive ways include being available to offer help, taking extra time to cover complex subjects, being mindful of student perceptions of fairness, and getting to know students on a personal level, then making curricular connections to students' lives. Content that involves significant events in pop culture is relevant to students' future goal, creates a sense of competent academic self-concept (offers opportunities for

success) and involves meaningful work with real world applications, while allowing students to share with peers, are all contributors to higher levels of student engagement. SEC is defined by Corso et al. (2013).

- Flow: optimal moments of satisfying experiences when people are fully engaged in the task they are performing (Pink, 2009).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Research Questions

How can curriculum design increase student engagement? What best practices increase student engagement?

Definition and Measurement of Student Engagement

According to Harbour et al. (2015), increasing student engagement has shown to improve academics, behavior, and emotional success. If this is the case, how can engagement be defined and measured? This paper examines literature to define what is meant by student engagement and examine how curriculum design and teacher practices contribute to increased student engagement. According to Harbour et al. engagement can be defined as behaviors of students that include both behavioral (participation) and psychological (identification with) factors, which can be cyclical. For instance, beginning with student attendance and responses in class, a sense of belonging can be established in classrooms, which can lead to a positive identification with school. Other Harbour et al research describes three forms of engagement: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive, all interrelated. Behavioral engagement includes actions such as raising a hand, responding to the teacher, and showing attention to a teacher or assignments. Emotional engagement is described as students' affective reactions to peers, teachers, and school. Cognitive engagement includes students' levels of effort, investment in learning, and willingness to use complex learning strategies to both master and comprehend course materials. Corso et al. (2013) also describe engagement as having three parts, which the authors describe as interrelated modes: engagement in thought, feelings, and action. Investment in learning and mastery, desire for challenge, self-control, planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's thinking

are characteristics of thought engagement. A sense of belonging, connectedness to, interest in, and passion for school and class content, as well as having confidence in their abilities and positive emotions about peers and teachers are characteristic of the feeling mode of engagement. Finally, attendance, class contributions, rule-following, completion of assignments, studying, and concentration and focus on academic tasks are the behaviors exhibited by students in the action mode of engagement.

Another definition of engagement is offered by Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, and Barch, (2004) as the behavioral intensity and emotional quality of a person's active involvement during a task. This definition aligns with Klem and Connell (2004) who suggest two types of psychological engagement: ongoing engagement, which concerns behavior, emotions, and thoughts during school, and reaction to challenge, measured by whether students persist or withdraw when they perceive failure. These types of engagement are typically measured by observations and both teacher and student surveys note the extent of effort, attention, and preparedness for class that students exhibit as well as the positive or negative coping strategies students use to deal with failure (Klem & Connell, 2004). Positive coping strategies reported by teachers and students involve students examining their behavior, making attempts to change, and preventing similar negative events from happening in the future. Negative coping strategies include blaming teachers or peers for failure, denying negative events, or perseverating about negative events and worrying about them while not taking action to ensure such events do not reoccur (Klem & Connell, 2004). While much of the research on students' cognitive and emotional or psychological engagement focuses on qualitative student self-reporting, behavioral engagement is often measured by teachers or researchers coding the following student behaviors:

visual tracking of teacher or speaker, choral response, hand-raising, responding to teacher instruction, and writing, reading, or completing assigned tasks. (Scott, Hirn, & Alter, 2014).

Curriculum Design that Increases Student Engagement

Dack and Tomlinson, (2014) shared four principles of engaging curriculum design based upon their review of research-based practices. Curriculum that helps students make personal connections to content, gives students meaningful choices, is relevant, and challenges and supports success for all learners helps make content compelling enough to engage learners. In following Mr. Garcia's high school civics course, as he redesigned two units of study with these engagement principles in mind, one can see how these principles drive curriculum. To make personal connections to Supreme Court Justices, photos of them were hung on the walls of the classroom. Students were given mystery fact cards with personal information about the Justices' life experiences and asked to match cards to the photo of the person described. Mystery facts included things such as "grew up in poverty." Students were then grouped according to which Supreme Court Justice most interested them and got to choose one of three projects to do about the Supreme Court. To make the projects relevant, students were asked to define what leadership qualities each Justice had and compare those qualities with themselves. In order to challenge and support all learners, three levels of materials were used. While Mr. Garcia's curriculum redesign offers specific examples, which he observes, increased student engagement, the very small sample size of one course and one instructor limits the validity of the research. Still, Dack and Tomlinson (2014) inspirationally concluded that "When any teacher designs curriculum with student engagement in mind, students hear this message: You matter" (p. 47).

Fine (2014) used the word *purpose* instead of relevance, and *cognitive rigor*, rather than challenge, but she used over 500 hours of ethnographic research in 20 different high schools across the country to support approaches to curriculum design that include both relevance and rigor. In her observations and interviews of students, Fine also documented a type of curriculum design described as “intellectually playful.” Descriptions of poetry slams and “physics jamz,” where students rewrite poetry and lyrics to popular songs to review concepts in literature and physics, offer examples of the kind of intellectually playful curriculum design Fine describes as engaging. Because adolescents often profess to be bored and disengaged with standard curriculum, and because adolescents are wired for the risk-taking that performing in front of peers requires, Fine made an argument for play as learning, not just for early childhood curriculum, but in high school also. Despite the documented research hours observing in high schools, however, the examples of such “intellectually playful” curriculum are limited, and suggest future study is needed, perhaps of secondary teachers “borrowing open-ended, project-based assignment ideas from their elementary colleagues.

In his book, Burgess (2012) offered eight chapters of specific presentational “hooks” tested in his own classroom for 16 years. Specific examples of questions educators might ask themselves as they design more engaging lessons are offered, and anecdotal evidence about student engagement is shared. Questions such as, “How can I incorporate movement or art or music into this lesson?” are those Burgess sees as the ‘A’ (ask and analyze) in his “pirate” mnemonic for increasing student engagement. Though Burgess is a professional development speaker and educator with years of experience and many specific examples of questions educators might ask as they design curriculum with the goal of increasing engagement, his book

offers more motivation and encouragement and practical ideas than research-based best practices.

Burgess (2012) offered his philosophy to teach like a pirate, take risks, and have adventures as a mnemonic device, using the word pirate. P for passion, I for immersion, R for rapport (with students), A for ask and analyze (curriculum and lesson plans), T for transformation, and E for enthusiasm. The words in this mnemonic, PIRATE, represent strategies designed to increase student engagement. While arguing for immersive curriculum experiences, Burgess suggested that many students mentally check out when teachers are setting up technology or doing administrative tasks (Burgess, 2012). Students mentally checking out are referred to as disengaged by Scott et al. (2014). Their research analyzed 1,197 direct observations of teacher instruction to determine their effect on student engagement and disruption and found statistically significant correlations between increased teacher instruction and positive student behaviors and low rates of teaching resulting in increased levels of disruption. This research suggests that teachers would be wise to minimize time spent in email, setting up technology, and other classroom or school procedures if they want to increase instructional time and student engagement.

Numerous studies conclude that building rapport or relationships with students is an effective way to increase student engagement (Burgess, 2012); Ellerbrock, Abbas, Diccio, Denmon, Sabella, & Hart, 2015; Hanna, 2014; Harbour et al., 2015; Klem & Connell, 2004). A study of 1,846 elementary and 2,430 secondary students and teachers in six urban elementary schools and three urban middle schools found student experience of engagement was more strongly influenced by their perception of high levels of teacher support at middle school than at

elementary (Klem & Connell, 2004). Middle school students with high levels of teacher-reported engagement were twice as likely as their peers to do well on attendance and achievement, while those with disengaged behaviors were 83% more likely to do poorly (Klem & Connell, 2004). Teacher support was defined by students' perceptions that teachers knew and cared about them, offered opportunities for choices, assigned relevant work, held clear expectations for conduct and learning, and used consequences that were consistent, predictable, and fair (Klem & Connell, 2004). Alvarez and Frey (2012) noted that trusting working relationships with students, families, and school personnel lie at the heart of student engagement.

Corso et al. (2013) presented an instructional model, they termed Student Engagement Core (SEC), which suggests that teacher, student, and content are variables in classroom interactions that impact engagement. Teacher practices which impact engagement in positive ways include being available to offer help, taking extra time to cover complex subjects, being mindful of student perceptions of fairness, and getting to know students on a personal level, then making curricular connections to students' lives. Teachers can also manage content in ways that promote student engagement, according to Corso et al. (2013). Content that involves significant events in pop culture is relevant to students' future goals, creates a sense of competent academic self-concept (offers opportunities for success), and involves meaningful work with real world applications, while allowing students to share with peers, are all contributors to higher levels of student engagement.

Students who have patterns of disengagement in school have usually developed these patterns by high school as a coping mechanism to deal with, as Hanna (2014) suggested, their own lack of skills and unstable support systems. Hanna recommended four approaches to build

emotionally honest classrooms: modeling behavior teachers wish to see, weaving humor into the classroom, teachers holding themselves accountable for teaching errors, and overcoming teachers' own fears. Research shows that students who lack motivation have issues of trust and fear in their lives and need to feel safe in the classroom in order to participate more fully. Establishing trust and encouraging risk-taking are skills research shows increase student motivation to participate and learn.

Harbour et al. (2015), in their review of 55 pieces of previous empirical research, supported the premise that effective teacher practices contribute to higher levels of student engagement and investigate several ways for teachers to foster student engagement. Modeling, the practice of teachers demonstrating a desired skill or behavior while describing their actions and decisions aloud (think aloud), was found to increase on-task reading behaviors, promote engagement, and increase reading comprehension and achievement (Harbour et al., 2015). Research findings from seven different studies "...demonstrates modeling as a powerful way to influence students' reasoning skills, behaviors, and actions inside and outside of the classroom" (Harbour et al., 2015). In other words, modeling allows students to extend their practice of modeled behaviors to real world situations.

Offering opportunities to respond (OTR) was another teacher practice investigated. Results varied in different studies depending on three factors. The type of delivery (fact-based or higher order questioning) elicited different responses from different levels of students. In one study, secondary students engaged more with higher order questioning, and elementary students engaged more with fact-based (simple recall) questioning, while another study found no difference in engagement with different types of delivery (Harbour et al., 2015). Research

findings also varied with respect to rate of presentation, with some studies suggesting as many as eight OTR per minute being ideal, and others noting that three OTR per minute had positive effects on student engagement. Method of response was the third factor investigated. Research varied here as well, with one study indicating that a combination of choral response (70%) and individual response (30%) increased academic achievement better than choral only, and another noting that choral response using response cards or white boards increased academic responses and decreased disruptive behavior (Harbour et al., 2015).

Feedback providing verbal and nonverbal responses to students' academic and behavioral performance was the third specific teacher behavior that was investigated. Positive feedback was found to increase positive behavior, time-on-task, compliance, student accuracy, and appropriate response to instruction (Harbour et al., 2015). Various research on feedback suggests that a ratio of four positive feedback responses to each corrective (negative) response is ideal, but that providing positive feedback is an underutilized tool which benefits both teachers and students (Harbour et al., 2015).

Harbour et al. (2015) stated that although research findings vary, all findings support the following: teachers who use more modeling and think alouds, offer more opportunities for student response, and more feedback, particularly positive feedback, increase student engagement. Because students observe and imitate teachers, these practices offer the additional benefit of creating positive loops where students model desired behaviors for peers, respond and give positive feedback to peers, and thus engage even more as a classroom community. Though Harbour et al. offered an extensive literature review in support of effective teacher practices

which increase student engagement, a limitation was that the methods of research for each study were not reported.

Reeve et al. (2004) studied 20 veteran high school teachers in the Midwest and concluded that teachers who participated in an informational session on how to support students' autonomy and who engaged themselves in independent study on a website constructed for the study were able to teach and motivate their students in more autonomy-supportive ways. Reeve et al. (2004) also found that greater teacher use of autonomy-supportive, instructional behaviors increased engagement for their students. Examples of autonomy supportive behavior for teachers included finding ways to include student interests, choices, preferences, curiosity, or sense of challenge into lessons.

In a review of 15 studies, Morgan (2006) differentiated between choice-making, allowing students to select their own tasks and preferences, which means increasing student access to desired academic tasks or materials. This review also determined that providing preferred tasks increased student engagement, behavior, and academic performance, while offering student choices had either modest or no effects on engagement levels. One reviewed study offered conflicting information, citing that offering student choice increased academic task completion and success. Since special needs children were the subjects in the studies Morgan reviewed, these findings may be more helpful to educators with special needs students in their classrooms and may not as aptly apply to the general education population.

To summarize, research suggests that effective curriculum design and teacher practices can positively influence student engagement in secondary classrooms. Further research is needed to study specific methods of curriculum design or models proposed such as SEC to

confirm anecdotal support for these methods and models. Research strongly supports that establishing trusting relationships and rapport with students increases student engagement, positive behaviors, and academic success. Little is known about the current educational emphasis on testing and the effects of standardized tests on student engagement. This is a subject that merits more investigation as well. What is known is that teacher behaviors which increase rapport with students and foster greater engagement and success, have little cost and great benefit to increasing both student and teacher success and enjoyment.

Chapter 3: Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this research paper was to answer the questions: “How can curriculum design increase student engagement?” and “What are teacher best practices that increase student engagement?” Chapter 1 provided background information on the topic, while Chapter 2 presented a literature review of the research. In Chapter 3 I summarize findings, describe implications, and make recommendations to secondary teachers who seek to increase levels of student engagement in their classrooms.

Conclusions

I reviewed 12 studies and read two books: Daniel Pink’s *Drive*, and Dave Burgess’ *Teach Like a Pirate*, to learn what curriculum design and teacher practices increase secondary student levels of engagement. I also implemented the suggested curriculum design and teacher practices in my own classroom, which produced generally positive results. Studies such as Fine (2014), Reeve et al. (2004), and Corso et al. (2013), supported Dack and Tomlinson (2014) who share four principles of engaging curriculum design based upon their review of research-based practices. Curriculum that helps students make personal connections to content, gives students meaningful choices, is relevant, and challenges and supports success for all learners, helps make content compelling enough to engage learners.

Harbour et al. (2015) found that teacher modeling or “think alouds,” offering students more opportunities to respond (OTR), and increasing positive teacher feedback to students increased student on-task behaviors, engagement, and achievement. Hanna, (2014) also supported teacher modeling as beneficial to student engagement. Corso et al. (2013) identified Student Engagement Core (SEC) as beneficial to student engagement. SEC includes teacher

practices such as being available to offer help, taking extra time to cover complex subjects, being mindful of student perceptions of fairness, and getting to know students on a personal level, then making curricular connections to students' lives. Content that involves significant events in pop culture, is relevant to students' future goals, creates a sense of competent academic self-concept (offers opportunities for success), and involves meaningful work with real world applications, while allowing students to share with peers, are all contributors to higher levels of student engagement.

Research from Hanna (2014) showed that students who lack motivation (engagement) have issues of trust and fear in their lives and need to feel safe in the classroom to participate more fully. Establishing trust and encouraging risk-taking are teacher skills research shows increase student motivation to participate and learn. Burgess (2012), Ellerbrock et al. (2015), Hanna (2014), Harbour et al. (2015), and Klem and Connell (2004) all concluded that building rapport or relationships with students is an effective way to increase student engagement.

Recommendations

Making curriculum relevant with applications to real world situations and current pop-culture are strategies that Corso et al. (2013) recommended as part of SEC. Dack and Tomlinson (2014) added that curriculum should challenge and support all learners. This requires different choices in reading or information sources for students with varying abilities. Offering student choice in projects and assessments further increases student engagement according to Dack and Tomlinson (2014), Reeve et al. (2004), and Morgan (2006).

Harbour et al. (2015), in their review of 55 pieces of previous empirical research, supported the premise that effective teacher practices contribute to higher levels of student

engagement. Teacher practices that increase levels of student engagement include the teacher think aloud method, as well as offering more OTR for students, and increasing the amount of positive feedback given to a ratio of four positives for each negative comment. Additionally, since building rapport or relationships with students is an effective way to increase student engagement, teacher skills are needed to establish the type of trusting, risk-taking classroom environment which motivates students to engage.

Implications

As a Family and Consumer Sciences teacher with hours of training on interpersonal communications and the dynamics of relationships, it is easy for me to develop a trusting classroom climate, encourage risk-taking, and build rapport and relationships with my students. This is not true for every secondary level educator, however. One of the best parts about my work is that I run a program where I pair a high school student helper, who has an interest in a future in education, with an elementary teacher in our district who would like help. As I observe in over 40 elementary classrooms per year, I see that the engagement levels my elementary colleagues achieve with students far surpass the level of engagement at secondary schools. This may be in part because the choice to pursue elementary education is often about a love for children; while secondary instructors often profess a love for subject matter, rather than children. A return to focus on students above subject matter material means that we can build rapport and relationships, which research shows improves student engagement. Furthermore, teacher support was defined by students as teachers who knew and cared about them by Klem and Connell (2004) and by Corso et al. (2013) as getting to know students on a personal level, then making curricular connections to students' lives. I have made it a priority to take time to greet each

student as they enter and exit my classroom this year. Though we are a large suburban high school, and I do not find the time to attend all student events, I have also made it a habit to clip articles about my students from the local paper and give them to students as they enter class. This creates positive relationships with students knowing I care about them outside of class as well as inside. Further, I have replaced “I teach Family and Consumer Science” with “I teach students at Forest Lake Senior High,” to make students feel valued and increase their engagement.

Once we know our students, we can involve their interests and make connections to pop-culture in our curriculum. Once again, I consider myself fortunate to be a Family and Consumer Sciences teacher. What I teach is always relevant to students’ lives as I teach about relationships, finances, and human development. Much of the assessment in my courses is relevant, real world, and interesting to students. Students create budgets, select the best credit card offer for them, interview friends, parents, grandparents, and teach playschool to 3, 4, and 5-year old children. The relevance and meaning found in these assignments and projects do increase student engagement. Inspired by the topic of increasing student engagement, however, and given specific suggestions from Burgess (2012), I have implemented much more music into my classroom, particularly this year in Family Dynamics, with a song of the day centered on the topic of the day. I play the song while students complete a reflective writing exit ticket, and 100% of the students participate and finish the writing. Some students may even achieve “flow,” asking me for continued writing time, or to play the song a second time so they can “finish.” This level of participation is not the norm at the end of most secondary classroom periods, especially since I teach 90 minute blocks, and most teens find it difficult to sustain focus for that

length of time. Fine (2014) also documented a type of curriculum design described as “intellectually playful.” Her descriptions of poetry slams and “physics jamz,” have helped me to offer student presentation and assessment options that include music, video, and photos. Simply offering students choices or options increases the chance that they will engage and music, videos, and photos I have found are especially engaging to secondary level students as it is representative of how they engage on social media platforms. This to me, is bringing pop-culture into my classroom, something recommended by engagement experts.

Summary

To summarize, research suggests that effective curriculum design and teacher practices can positively influence student engagement in secondary classrooms. Further research is needed studying specific methods of curriculum design or models proposed, such as SEC to confirm anecdotal support for these methods and models. Curricular models that include relevant, real world experiences, and connect to students’ lives increase the likelihood of high student engagement and achievement. Research strongly supports that establishing trusting relationships and rapport with students increases student engagement, positive behaviors, and academic success.

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