

Strategies to Reinforce Student Engagement

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This is my last website article until September. It seems as if it was only a couple of months ago that I wrote that same sentence to begin my June, 2014 article. How quickly the year has gone by. It is a similar feeling when my wife Marilyn and I drive to Cape Cod each summer for me to do my annual week-long seminar sponsored by the New England Educational Institute. As we drive on the grounds where the condo at which we stay is located, Marilyn and I have the same thought, “Can you believe it’s already been a year since we were last here?” The seemingly rapid passing of time is another indication for me that each moment is precious and that we must not neglect those activities that bring joy and meaning to our lives.

I have written in previous columns about the regrets that people facing death express for opportunities they missed, especially spending more time with family and friends. In some of my workshops I have asked participants to consider what regrets they would have if they knew they had only a brief time to live. I also ask them to consider what steps they can take immediately to remedy these regrets. I know that attending activities that involve my grandchildren Maya, Teddy, Sophie, and Lyla are always joyful. These and other family gatherings remain top priorities for me.

Favorite Moments

Given my interest in activities that bring meaning to our lives, I often ask participants in my workshops, whether they are mental health professionals, teachers, parents, or business people to identify their favorite moments both at home and at work. By chance, during the past couple of months I have given presentations for many educators and requested that they not only reflect upon those experiences they had when they were students that boosted their motivation and dignity in the school setting but to consider ways in which they have created similar moments for their students.

On many occasions I have devoted my September article to themes related to schools and education to coincide with the beginning of the new school year. Although the school year has recently ended or will end in the next few days in most locations, I decided to address school practices in this column. The decision was based on a couple

of factors. First, I am scheduled to give a number of opening day presentations at schools or school districts in August and the beginning of September. For several I have been asked to send some chapters I have written so that staff and faculty might gain greater familiarity with my work in advance of my visit to their schools.

As one school administrator told me, “I certainly want my staff to relax and have time off from their usual activities while on summer break, but many of them enjoy doing some reading and reflecting on their classroom practices prior to the beginning of the new school year.”

A Lessening of Student Engagement

A second reason that prompted me to share some thoughts about education in this column was an article I just read in the June, 2015 issue of *Monitor on Psychology* written by Lorna Collier titled “Grabbing Students.” Its theme? Strategies for engaging students so that they will be more motivated and more successful in the learning process.

Collier writes, “For many young children, school is an exciting place. Kids in primary grades—especially kindergartens, first- and second-graders—are eager to absorb new ideas and information. But how many of them still feel that way about school by the time they’ve grown into teenagers? Too often, research shows, children lose that spark.”

These opening sentences grabbed my attention (pun intended) for several reasons, one because of a chapter I co-authored with my daughter-in-law, Dr. Suzanne Brooks, and my colleague Dr. Sam Goldstein that examined the similarities among the concepts of student engagement, intrinsic motivation, and resilience from the vantage point of mindsets (this chapter appeared in *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* edited by Drs. Sandra Christenson at the University of Minnesota, Amy Reschly at the University of Georgia, and Cathy Wylie at the New Zealand Council of Educational Psychology). In our chapter, Suzanne, Sam, and I suggested specific strategies for reinforcing engagement, motivation, and resilience in students.

In a paper describing the *Check & Connect* program developed by Christenson and her colleagues, including Dr. James Appleton at the Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia, a program aimed to reinforce student engagement and lessen student dropout, engagement was defined as “the student’s active participation in academic and co-curricular or school-related activities and commitment to education goals and learning.

Engaged students find learning meaningful and are invested in their learning and future. Student engagement drives learning, requires energy and effort, is affected by multiple contextual influences, and can be achieved by all learners.”

In support of the opening comments in her article, Collier refers to a 2014 poll conducted by Gallup of 825,000 5th through 12th grade students. Nearly half of the students reported being either not engaged (28 percent) or actively disengaged (19 percent) in school. Engagement was found to decrease as students progressed through school. Interestingly, in my January, 2014 article, I cited a Gallup study undertaken to examine engagement in the workplace; the Gallup researchers found that 18% of employees were “actively disengaged” while 52% were “not engaged.” Collier cites other studies of student engagement and disengagement, one published in *Education Week* that examines teacher and administrator observations of the engagement of students in the school setting.

Dr. Jacqueline Eccles, an education professor at the University of California, Irvine, quoted in Collier’s article, observes, “For kids, motivation and engagement in school on average drops as they move from the elementary school into the secondary school system. You see it in attendance, in getting into trouble, in drop outs from high school and also in dropping out of college.”

Eccles offers an explanation of why students are disengaged—an explanation rooted in the mindset of students. “They don’t think they can succeed in school. They don’t think it’s important; they don’t see its relevance to their lives. It creates too much anxiety. It’s not taught in a way that’s interesting, so it has no appeal to them.”

A Mindset and Educational Practices for Student Engagement

To counteract this negative mindset, Eccles and her colleagues have advanced what they call the “expectancy-value model,” a framework that “posits that students are more likely to be fully engaged in school if they expect they can do well and if they value the learning that schools provide.” In one study of this model, Drs. Chris Hulleman at James Madison University and Judith Harackiewicz at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, asked 262 9th and 10th grade students to write essays about the relevance and value of their science courses to their lives. A control group was simply requested to write summaries of their studies.

The first group of students improved their grades compared with the control group and, very importantly, stated they were more interested in taking science classes in the future. The very act of focusing on the value of a course heightened involvement in the course. This finding supports a recommendation I have often made, namely, that engagement and intrinsic motivation will be reinforced when there is an active discussion with students of the relevance of various educational practices. I believe that introducing such a discussion conveys to students that we are truly interested in and committed to their learning.

Collier summarizes other proven guidelines for student engagement and motivation that parallel those offered by Suzanne, Sam, and myself. These include:

Create personal connections. As anyone who has attended one of my workshops knows, I always place this variable at the top of my list since it highlights the power of the relationship between teacher and student. The absence of a positive relationship contributes to disengagement and a loss of interest in learning. As I have frequently noted during my presentations, “Students don’t care what you know until they first know you care.” A number of my writings, including those found on my website, highlight research indicating that students are more likely to be engaged and less likely to drop out of school if they feel there is at least one adult in the school setting—hopefully, many—who shows an interest in them, not only as students but beyond the student role. In interviews I have conducted, students have spoken highly of teachers and administrators who know their names, are aware of their interests, are nonjudgmental, and smile.

Foster hands-on activities and small group projects. Collier describes an activity from one school in which student-led Socratic discussions in an English class had the student leading the discussion actually pose as Socrates for the day, including a fluffy fake beard. In an article I wrote many years ago about the use of storytelling, I cited research that found that play-acting enhanced the learning process by involving both body and mind and also adding a quality of fun.

In the school where students assumed the role of Socrates, students were also allowed to choose how to demonstrate what that they had learned, whether through a video, a PowerPoint project, artwork, or a combination of these. In a number of schools I have visited, I have been impressed by the enthusiasm displayed by students of all ages as

they prepare a PowerPoint presentation. They are fully engaged and have eagerly shown me their finished product.

Provide students with choice and ownership. In my writings about creating “motivating environments,” I have emphasized the work of Drs. Edward Deci and Richard Ryan at the University of Rochester in New York, who developed “self-determination theory” (SDT). It is my belief that people will be more engaged in any environment (school or work) when they feel a sense of ownership and responsibility for what occurs in that environment. It is for this reason that I not only ask students but teachers and administrators as well, “What choices or decisions have you made about your own responsibilities or what transpires in the school/classroom setting?”

Not surprisingly, people are more motivated and engaged when they feel they are afforded some choice or permitted to make even small decisions in that environment. In one study conducted by Deci and his colleagues, students were found to do more homework and do it more effectively when they were given a choice between two very similar homework assignments compared with a group of students who were not given any choice. I ask teachers to think about how often they use the word “choice” in their classrooms or how often they permit students to make certain decisions. What many teachers have discovered is that providing choices for students does not lessen their own authority but rather creates a more positive, collaborative learning climate.

Focus on mastery. While many schools focus on grades, “a mastery-based system handles this differently, with the focus on making sure the content is learned rather than on grading.” A mastery-based approach has major impact not only on students learning material but also on lessening cheating in the classroom. Dr. Eric Anderman at Ohio State University states, “What we find over and over again, when students are in classrooms where teachers really emphasize mastery of content and you give kids opportunities to master the materials, you get very little cheating—contrasted to classroom where the teacher just says you’re going to have a test on Friday and you’d better know the material.”

Build experiences of success. This is closely aligned with an emphasis on mastery and seems to be such an obvious point. In my presentations I have noted that “success builds on success and we should establish educational practices in which students

immediately experience small accomplishments.” Collier writes, “Anderman favors giving students small, bite-sized chunks of material to master one bit at a time so they won’t be discouraged and can see themselves as successful learners. So, for instance, in a first-year Spanish course, teachers shouldn’t focus on the end goal of being able to read and hold conversations in Spanish, but rather point to a task they will master that week—say, counting to 20 in Spanish.”

Anderman adds, “This is an incredibly powerful tool with motivating kids and we really need to work more with teachers getting them to understand that setting short-term goals and showing kids they can reach these goals can go such a long way.” I have found that many educators already emphasize short-term goals in teaching, but certainly it should be a guiding principle for all teachers.

The issue of experiencing success also ties to a metaphor I introduced in my work almost 35 years ago, namely, that we must learn to identify and reinforce each youngster’s “islands of competence.” As I have often questioned, “What individuals would want to be in an environment in which they felt people mainly focused on their deficits or what they had difficulty accomplishing rather than appreciating their beauty and strengths? When you attend to the islands of competence of students, they are more likely to be motivated to engage even in those activities that have proven problematic in the past.”

Don’t compare kids. I am certain this point will generate much discussion, agreement, and disagreement. Anderman offers an intriguing observation that “star charts” on classroom walls that indicate which students have learned particular subject matter such as multiplication tables do more harm than good. “They make the smart kids feel really good and everyone else feel bad, especially kids who are not on it.” Comparing grades and scores of students is seen to be an obstacle to students being motivated by their own growth and not the performance of others.

Dr. Tim Urdan at Santa Clara University says, “We want students to focus on where you were last month and where are you now and can you see that growth? That’s motivating.”

A Few Final Words

I hope that these different observations and recommendations about student engagement and motivation prompt a lively discussion among school administrators and teachers about educational practices in their school as they prepare for the new school year to begin in a couple of months.

I also hope that prior to my next article in September, all of you have opportunities to engage in activities that prove very satisfying and re-energizing.

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