

A QUESTION OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

PRIMARY PRINCIPAL'S SABBATICAL REPORT

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A review of literature on student engagement* and an investigation of pedagogical approaches which motivate and engage Year 6 to 8 learners

***A Definition of Student Engagement**

Engagement is a multi-faceted construct that encompasses students' sense of belonging and connectedness to their school, teachers and peers; their sense of agency, self efficacy and orientation to achieve within their classrooms and in their broader extra-curricular endeavours; their involvement, effort, levels of concentration and interest in subjects and learning in general; and the extent to which learning is enjoyed for its own sake, or seen as something that must be endured to receive a reward or avoid sanction. Further, engagement is a variable state of being that is influenced by a range of internal and external factors including the perceived value or relevance of the learning and the presence of opportunities for students to experience appropriately-pitched challenge and success in their learning. As such engagement is malleable by the actions of teachers.

Student Engagement in the Middle Years of Schooling (Years 7-10): A Literature Review by Robyn Gibbs and Dr Jenny Poskitt .M.O.E. June 2010

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I appreciate the willingness of Neil O'Reilly, from Windsor School, to share his PRIDE programme with both myself and the wider educational community.

INTRODUCTION

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire” *W.B Yeats*

A talk by Professor Terry Crooks on student motivation to a group of Otago principals prompted me to reflect on these realities in our schools...

As children progress through the school system an increasing number of them

- No longer see school as worthwhile
- Lack the confidence in their ability to learn
- Lack the motivation to put in the required effort

Professor Crooks found when reviewing the results of Otago University's National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) student surveys that although almost all children arrive at school enthusiastic to be there, four years later in the middle of primary schooling, most still remain enthusiastic about school and learning. The picture is not so rosy by Year 8 when their responses to the NEMP surveys are less enthusiastic about school and learning. By the second year of high school it is obvious that many have lost the motivation to learn at school. As a result they are unlikely to enjoy further success at school or with NCEA qualifications. In most cases they have the ability to succeed but have lost the will or self belief to do so.

Professor Crooks presentation and the subsequent discussion with my Otago colleagues sparked my interest in reviewing current research on student engagement, to investigate an example of a school programme with that features a high level of engagement with Year 4 to 8 children, and also to critically evaluate the issue of student engagement in my own school.

What Does Research Literature Say About Student Engagement?

An extensive summary of research on student engagement can be found in the in a 2010 Ministry of Education publication *Student Engagement in the Middle Years of Schooling (Years 7-10): A Literature Review by Robyn Gibbs and Dr Jenny Poskitt*.

I found this review of research on student engagement had similar themes to those in Prof Terry Crooks address.

They found..

'Research, both international and local, suggests that student engagement in school and learning decreases during the middle years of schooling. In New Zealand, disengagement with school is evident in truancy, stand-down, suspension and expulsion rates, which increase rapidly from age 11 (Ng, 2006). Students' attitudes towards reading, writing and mathematics decline as they move through the middle years and they become more critical about some of the teaching they experience (Cox & Kennedy, 2008). Further evidence from the Competent Learners at 14 study (Wylie et al. 2006) indicates that a third of the 14 year old participants did not find school engaging and a fifth wanted to leave school as soon as they could.

Although the performance of New Zealand students in international assessment studies is relatively high when compared to students from other countries, there are nevertheless issues of concern for some groups of students that are likely to have their roots in poor student engagement in learning. These issues include:

- Too many young New Zealanders leaving school with low literacy and numeracy skills.*
- Too many students, particularly Māori and Pasifika, leaving school early with low or no qualifications.*
- The wide spread of achievement within and between groups of students.*

Illustrative of this are the findings from a recent New Zealand study that suggested students became "less engaged in aspects of their learning at school over time and more critical about some of the teaching they were experiencing" (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 4). The source of students' increased disengagement was: "work that was at an inappropriate level of difficulty, finding subject content irrelevant or uninteresting; finding how they were learning [to be] dry and boring; and experiencing learning environments that were not conducive to learning (too noisy or disruptive; relationship issues with teachers or other students)" (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 4). Thus teachers could focus on (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'. (Gibbs and Poskitt 2010)

I reflected on a significant number of my own, predominantly male friends who did not achieve success at school but who have subsequently achieved at the highest level in business, sports and the arts. Some of them are risk takers, innovators and visionary thinkers who were, as one put it, found they were 'a square peg in a round hole' in a school system which stressed compliance and conforming, which did not take into account their learning interests, and where in many cases there was a distinct lack of male role models. Why did school not motivate and engage these learners and how many children in our schools will tell a similar story about their experience at school?

The school experience of my friends is not an uncommon one.

Sir Ken Robinson in his TED lecture 'Schools Kill Creativity' asserts that education can dislocate people from their natural talents. That life is not linear as suggested by the standardized view of education but organic. He believes that education is about passion - what excites the spirit..

This supports Crook's comments about fostering passion and 'lighting fires' for our young learners.

Robinson concluded in his lecture that...

'Many highly talented, brilliant people think they are not - because they think they were never good at school, weren't valued, or were actually stigmatized.. alienating many kids'..

Ken Robinsons TED talk can be found at..

http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html

It is apparent that this increasing disengagement takes root in the middle school years. Professor Crooks believes that educators have a duty to make education stimulating and exciting for almost all children, particularly in the middle years of schooling. This is the challenge for educators who work with children at this important time in their schooling.

Crooks contends that the official curriculum keeps broadening with technology, dance and drama being added as required subjects in the last 15 years. Subjects that used to be covered in intermediate and high school now included in the early years and also areas of community concern are also being added such as drug education, enterprise education and increased physical activity. We are creating a treadmill of learning for teachers and learners. Quantity of learning is threatening quality of learning. This is helping to quench the fire of learning rather than light it!

The revised New Zealand Curriculum provides schools with the opportunity to be selective about what they teach. It allows time to explore topics more widely and in more interesting ways. It allows children to choose from a range of options and it does give teachers more space to work intensively with individual students. How can we use this opportunity to avoid doing the same things the same way, a

way which is not engaging a significant number of our learners in the middle years of schooling?

Professor Crooks summarised, under four headings, what we know about the requirements for student motivation

1. Foster Children's Passions

It is important to cherish and support the enthusiasms that students bring to school. It is invaluable, for all children, to have at least one area of passion and success at school

2. Light Fires for Children

It's important to find ways to capture interest and build enthusiasm for areas that were not initial interests of the children. Great teachers are great because they light fires for children.

3. Challenge the Learner

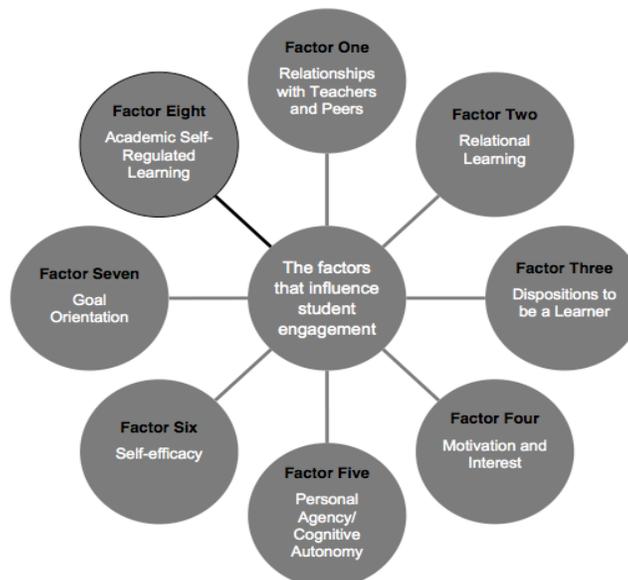
It is important to match the demands of tasks to the capabilities of students. Too little challenge leads to boredom, too much to threat and fear.

4. Success builds Motivation

It is important to help students succeed with significant challenges. This is the main factor that builds motivation. Challenges need to be at the right level and success needs to feel like a significant achievement

Gibbs and Poskett grouped the factors that influence student achievement into eight categories of factors that Influence Student Engagement

Figure 1: The factors that influence student engagement



Several of the factors (goal orientation, academic self regulation, self efficacy, personal agency, motivation and interest) are underpinned by the notions that students deserve and desire to exercise self-determination with respect to their learning.

“Self determination remains a challenge as adults still see students as youth to be developed, supervised, or controlled. Students must be given opportunities to do more than participate in academically rigorous, adult-sanctioned activities. Rather youth must partake in the active and critical creation of the institutions they attend.” (Gibbs and Poskett 2010)

How can this research on student engagement be used in the classroom to promote student engagement?

The key ideas for teachers to consider from Poskett and Gibbs research literature review are summarized under the following headings..

- Nurture trusting relationships
- Know your learners well
- Be fair
- Make learning fun
- View learning from a student perspective
- Discuss learning
- Promote cooperative learning
- Facilitate peer tutoring
- Use problem-based learning
- Incorporate ‘hands-on’ work
- Use teacher demonstrations
- Utilise video games and technology
- Indicate why learning something is important and relate content to students’ lives
- Enable students to take responsibility for their own learning

They concluded that the implementation of these ideas requires teachers to foster student engagement in classrooms by developing interactive, varied and relevant lessons, being encouraging and supportive to students. Classrooms in which students, feel comfortable asking questions, are expected to do their best, where instruction is challenging, and specific feedback is given to help students with their current learning are less likely to have bored and disengaged students.

Most students like lessons to be paced and with varied learning tasks (not continuously listening to the teacher or note taking). Focusing on active learning (such as interactive group tasks, hands-on activities, differentiated instruction)

and a relevant curriculum (drawing from students' background, interests and academic needs) are fundamental elements.

Making connections between information taught and real life, especially everyday concerns of the age group of students, is highly effective in engaging 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.

Promoting Student Engagement in Schools



Windsor Schools PRIDE Home Learning Programme

An article by Neil O'Reilly from Windsor School, Christchurch, in The New Zealand Principal Magazine and a subsequent interview with Neil on Radio New Zealand National attracted my interest in his school's home learning programme 'PRIDE'.

Details of the programme and the podcast link to the radio interview can be found on Windsor School's website www.windsor.school.nz

Inspired by Neil's work, Clyde School adopted a similar programme 'Spirit of Clyde', introduced and administered by Barb Lambeth, the schools Deputy Principal.

SPIRIT of CLYDE



This alternative to the traditional homework model embodies many of the themes that have emerged from research on student engagement.

Windsor School's PRIDE and Clyde School's 'Spirit of Clyde' home learning programmes aim to ...

- Foster children's passions
- Light Fires for Children
- Challenge the learner
- Give children the opportunity to succeed with significant challenges
- Give children opportunities for a high level of self determination
- Ensure learning is meaningful and usually 'hands on'
- Promote cooperative learning

- Develop opportunities for close relationships to develop between children, parents, community members and teachers as they share the learning journey together.

This differs from a model of learning where '*adults still see students as youth to be developed, supervised, or controlled*' (Poskett and Gibbs 2010)

Windsor's PRIDE and Clyde School's 'Spirit of Clyde' programmes continue to build and refine learning opportunities in a rich a varied range of contexts using best practice from educational research on student engagement.

I was interested in the reported successes with disengaged learners of other challenge based programmes with older learners such as such as Outward Bound and the Duke of Edinburgh Awards scheme. Is there something similar for primary school children?

A recent initiative being trialed in Edinburgh, Scotland is the Junior Awards Scheme Scotland, (JASS) which promotes challenging, self directed and authentic learning for primary school children

An evaluation of the pilot can be found at :

<http://www.fota.org.uk/junior-award-scheme>

To What Extent Are Children in Our School Engaged with Their Learning? Self Review Tools Available for Schools on Measuring Student Engagement.

It was logical after reading a review of research on student engagement to ask how engaged were the learners at my school?

Schools seeking to carry out a review on student engagement and associated issues with student welfare have some useful online tools to gather this information.

Clyde is one of a number of schools which use NZCER's 'Me and My School': A Self Review tool for Student Motivation and Engagement', a web based student survey which provides schools with a tool for capturing student voice on their level of engagement at school. The survey questions reflect many of the key themes from student engagement research.

Details of the survey can be found at:

<http://www.nzcersurvey.org.nz/>

The detailed report provided on completion of this survey provides school leadership with information to assist with the planning of school initiatives to increase students engagement with their learning.

NZCER 's www.wellbeingatschool.org.nz also provides schools with online surveys for students, teachers and school management teams with regard to a range of aspects of student welfare at school. The extensive reports generated by the surveys may provide useful indicators to schools on possible reasons for student disengagement with their learning.

Conclusion

A number of capable learners do not achieve their potential in the school system because they lack confidence and motivation and no longer see school as worthwhile.

There is a great deal of research on student disengagement from learning in the middle years of schooling. This research contains some consistent themes on how teachers can motivate and engage their learners.

There are a number of examples of effective programmes in schools which incorporate these principles and have 'switched on' otherwise disengaged learners.

Schools have available some effective survey tools to review the level of their students engagement with their learning. This information provides useful evidence to plan initiatives to increase student motivation.

Reviewing and addressing issues with student engagement in the middle years of schooling may be the most effective way for New Zealand schools to reduce their 'tail of underachievement'.

References

Student Engagement in the Middle Years of Schooling (Years 7-10): A Literature Review by Robyn Gibbs and Dr Jenny Poskitt .M.O.E. 2010

Ken Robinsons TED talk can be found at..

http://www.ted.com/talks/ken_robinson_says_schools_kill_creativity.html

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