



# From Research to Practice: Student Engagement

*Karen V. Bedell*

*Series Editors: Prof. Punya Mishra & Prof. Matthew J. Koehler  
Michigan State University, USA*

## Introduction by Punya Mishra & Matthew J. Koehler

It gives us great pleasure to introduce the second article for a regular series of columns that introduces readers to contemporary educational research and its implications for practice. This column addresses the important topic of *student engagement*. This column was written by Karen V. Bedell, a doctoral student at the College of Education, Michigan State University working under our supervision.

## Student Engagement Getting Started

Testing, grades, and scores are a key part of education today. They not only function as measures of student learning but are also expected to be motivating. It appears commonsensical that students would engage more with school and the curriculum in order to receive better grades or scores on a test. As it turns out, what appears to be common sense, may not be so. In fact, educational psychology research has consistently shown that external rewards may actually reduce student engagement, rather than enhance it.

For instance, consider the research conducted by Mark Lepper, David Greene, and Richard Nisbett. Back in 1973 they studied some preschool children who enjoyed drawing with magic markers. They brought some of the children into another room and offered them “good player awards” (certificates and ribbons) if they would draw pictures with the markers. Other children were not offered awards, but received them as a surprise for drawing pictures with the markers. Later when these rewards were removed, however, children who previously came to expect a reward were no longer interested in drawing with the markers and they moved on to other

activities. The children who received unexpected rewards and children who were never offered any awards did not lose interest in drawing with the markers.

Similarly, in 1989, Diana Cordova and Mark Lepper gave children a problem-solving task based upon a popular board game in the United States that has children play detective and solve a mystery. Some children were offered a toy for finishing the activity, while others used a version of the activity embellished with a comic-book style story inviting the children to become detectives. The results were impressive.

Students who were offered toys as rewards relied on guesses and unimaginative strategies to solve the mystery. More importantly, they also showed a preference for easier problems in the future. Students who were offered the more challenging, open-ended comic-book task, on the other hand, were more creative in their solutions, more positive about themselves, and more ambitious about future challenges.

These two examples illustrate a remarkable finding – *rewards for completing activities do not help students to learn*. Some students may not even get motivated by grades. How then can teachers inspire their students to engage in learning? How can teachers influence their students’ enthusiasm for learning? We will explore what the research says about some of these issues and offer suggestions for practitioners.

## What does the Research Say?

*What is student engagement?*





Student engagement is the psychological investment in learning. Engaged students are curious, interested, and excited by challenges. They persist through difficult tasks and they take satisfaction in their accomplishments. They are involved in learning because it is interesting, rather than simply doing the work so they can move on. They become *intrinsically motivated* and they do things out of enjoyment rather than to earn a prize or avoid punishment. In other words, engaged students are the kinds of learners we all would like to have in our classrooms!

### ***What does engagement look like?***

Engagement is more than just listening, behaving, and being “on task”. A holistic view of engagement considers what students do, what they think, and how they feel.

- *Behavioral engagement* is observed when students attend class, talk about what they are learning, and keep trying when the work is hard. These students are taking notes, doing homework, listening carefully, posing questions, participating in small groups, and

helping others. What happens when the teacher stops talking? Do students continue the conversation among themselves, moving toward the desired learning outcome? Behavioral engagement in early elementary grades predicts later success on test scores, grades, and the decision to drop out of high school.

- *Cognitive engagement* reflects a student’s investment in learning. Students who are cognitively engaged set learning goals, self-regulate their own behavior, and desire to go beyond the minimum requirements. It’s the difference between surface level rote learning and deep level discoveries of meaning and connections. It is effort focused on mastering the material. Teachers can increase this type of engagement by developing students’ higher level thinking skills (analysis, making connections) and encouraging active responding (writing, responding) as opposed to passive participation (listening, taking turns). Teachers can also generate this engagement by making learning fun,

like the comic-book scenario mentioned earlier. This form of engagement is also linked to achievement, deep understanding, and flexible thinking skills.

- *Emotional engagement* reflects a student’s enjoyment of and sense of belonging to a school. It is developed by forming relationships and feeling successful at school. When students enjoy a subject, they are likely to value it in its own right and pursue additional learning on their own. A supportive student-teacher relationship is a primary source of students’ emotional engagement. Strong emotional engagement in school may be related to resilience during stress.

It is quite possible for students’ engagement to differ across the three dimensions and across subjects. For example, students can go through the motions of their coursework without cognitive engagement (i.e. without achieving deep understanding of the ideas) or without emotional engagement (i.e. with

no enjoyment of the process or feeling of achievement). Research suggests that these dimensions influence each other and are important to academic success, satisfaction, and persistence. What's more, teachers can make the difference between minimal participation and full-on enthusiasm.

### ***What are the outcomes of student engagement?***

Students' investment in learning has consequences for their academic, social, and emotional well-being. Engaged students learn more, develop greater critical thinking skills, and are more satisfied with school than disinterested students. The research shows that, over time, students who are more engaged in school have better grades and higher achievement on standardized tests. They are also more likely to stay in school and graduate. Behavioral engagement in elementary school has been shown to be a critical predictor of the decision to drop out of high school.

Engagement in school yields social and personal benefits that extend beyond the classroom. Benefits include interpersonal skills, social awareness, and establishing one's identity. It has been associated with moral and ethical development, as well as increased openness to diversity. Students appear to develop a sharper awareness of

their interests, skills, and values; which prepares them for success both occupationally and personally.

These benefits go beyond elementary and middle school to the college level as well. At the college level, student involvement yields commitment-to learning, to the school, to finishing the requirements for the degree, and in some ways, sets the stage for their future success in life.

### ***What influences student engagement?***

Engagement is facilitated by activities that are fun, selected by the student, challenging enough to be interesting, and involve relating to other people.

- *Fun* helps to connect learning material with characters and objects that the students are interested in. Instead of drills, turn learning into a game. Embellish plain learning activities with fantasy and characters.
- *Autonomy* develops when students perceive they have a choice over their actions and that their behavior is freely-chosen, rather than imposed by the teacher. For example, students can be given a choice of projects to complete; or the option to design their own. Abandon the notion that

everyone must do the same thing.

- *Competence* develops from feeling that one's efforts are successful. To raise students' sense of competence, teachers should offer feedback that downplays evaluation and shows students how to master the task at hand.
- *Relatedness* is the sense of connection between students and teachers. The student-teacher relationship is important to sustain engagement. Students who perceive that their teachers have confidence in them are more likely to try and are less likely to drop out of school than students who don't perceive teacher support.

Nothing influences student engagement more than a teacher who is passionate about teaching. It's been said that students "don't care what you know until they know you care".

### ***How Can Teachers Cultivate Student Engagement?***

In light of the research, what can teachers do to optimize their students' engagement? Instead of incentivizing students to learn through rewards, teachers should recognize that students already want to learn. There are four main ways teachers can tap into students' innate desire to learn.

#### ***Foster Relationships***

When students make positive connections in the classroom, those feelings generalize to the teacher and school, increasing affective engagement in learning. Create opportunities for students to form interpersonal relationships with other students-with icebreakers, pair and share exercises, small group discussions, and self-disclosure. Getting to know your students on a personal level enables you to offer learning experiences that they will value. When students struggle, reach out to them, point out their strengths, and build their efficacy for the challenges they face.

#### ***Foster Collaboration***



Many teachers expect students to listen while they do all of the talking. Teacher-led instruction has its place but when students work together and teach other, student involvement and motivation increase. Use collaborative work to minimize the down time associated with large group discussions or calling on one student at a time for answers. Suppose one student is assigned to learn about Thailand, another's job is to study China, and another learns about Vietnam. After they research their countries, they work together to create a presentation comparing and contrasting the three nations. The students depend on one another for information. Instead of just knowing where to locate these countries on a map, they have substantive conversations about them.

### **Challenge Students**

Avoid giving students busy work that calls for memorization, simple skills, or recall. Involve them in problem solving,

addressing real-world issues, creating new ideas, and critically evaluating what they read. As they master concepts and skills, push them to the next level, showing them where they can go next. Abandon the expectation of students doing the same activity in the same way at the same time.

### **Use Technology**

Use the technology that your students use. Blogs, wikis, and class websites can serve to showcase student work, supplement classroom instruction, and facilitate collaboration. In class, students can text their answers to formative assessment questions. Students can teach each other via slide presentations, shared documents, or social media such as Pinterest and Twitter. The interactivity of online tools is not only engaging, it may help students overcome cognitive and psychological difficulties.

Our enthusiasm for teaching will motivate them to meet the challenges we place before

them. Through strategies like these, teachers can create environments that fully engage students and cultivate a life-long interest in learning.

### **In conclusion**

Grades and scores and tests may be part and parcel of the classroom today. But the research is quite clear. These markers of success do not necessarily lead to student engagement. In fact the findings from the research point in another direction altogether. Students don't need to be incentivized for doing what they enjoy, nor should rewards be used in place of educational, fun activities. Instead of rewarding students for finishing their work, we educators should work towards enhancing students' interest in the tasks. This will not only improve their engagement with learning it will also payoff for them in the long run. Finally, speaking selfishly, these efforts at improving student engagement, will make classrooms more fun and enjoyable spaces for us (the educators) as well.

### **Further reading**

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#### **About the author:**

**Karen V. Bedell** is a doctoral student in educational psychology in the College of Education at Michigan State University. She is interested in student motivation and collaborative learning. You can find out more about her at <http://karenbedell.weebly.com/>.

#### **About the editors:**

**Prof. Punya Mishra** (<http://punyamishra.com/>) and **Prof. Matthew J. Koehler** (<http://mkoehler.educ.msu.edu/>) are professors of educational psychology and educational technology at Michigan State University. You can find out more about them by going to their respective websites.

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