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ARTICLE

Low Student Engagement Level in Struggling Learners and Ways to Address It

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Abstract

This article is concentrated on understanding the concept of 'student engagement' and investigates the outcomes of the increased engagement levels in struggling learners. It addresses the effectiveness of some of the methods targeting 'dips' in students' involvement levels and investigates its triggers. Student engagement has lately been on the radar of the educators' community as one of the foundational layers of teaching. It has been interlinked with sounder progress levels, improved attendance, and increased learning-related curiosity. Action Research was used as a methodological approach, with observations, journaling, and staff interviews being used as methods. A sound body of literature was researched to establish a solid framework for this study. The research has shown that improved engagement has the potential to lessen behaviour-related incidents, boost progress in struggling learners, and has a positive impact on the social climate. However, more research is needed to confirm this. In this study, a significant improvement in the number of successful tasks performed independently by children, a decrease in behavioural incidents, and improved social integration were present as the result of the strategy applied to increase engagement. Identifying pluming components of engagement (i.e., cognitive, social, behavioural) was discovered to be instrumental for the engagement-booster strategy to be effective.

Introduction

This work is dedicated to the issue that arguably can be considered as one of the most important in the teaching career. Notable researchers like Fullarton (2013) state that 'engagement' is an important outcome of schooling, and highlight that there are a number of ways in which it can be defined. High engagement levels bring teachers to the desirable outcomes: it enables most students to attain sound academic progress (Kuh, 2009; Harper Osher & Kneidinger, 2000, Zyngier, 2008). Studies mention that it likely is the determining factor for nurturing the students' desire to learn further, and decreasing behaviour management incidents (Rush & Balamotsou, 2006). Additionally, the effect of the elevated desire to attend school could be noticed in some research papers (Miranda-Zapada et al., 2018). Given the mentioned effects, this researcher believes that it is essential for a teacher to be able to detect low engagement levels, understand their impact, and know how to address them.

Being a multi-component notion, engagement is influenced by various elements (Fullarton, 2013):

- school factors (the size of the school, school type, location, and others);
- student background (native language, Parents' education level, and others);
- contextual factors;
- teacher factors (perceived class climate, perceived school climate, school problems, parental involvement, satisfaction with the workload, resources management, students' relationships, and others).

In this work, the researched factors affecting engagement are those influenced by a class teacher. This piece of action research is aimed at discovering, reflecting on and improving teaching techniques, and widening professional knowledge on student engagement.

Engagement is interlinked with motivation, and the latter is frequently viewed as a prerequisite and an instrumental component for classroom engagement (Russell, Ainley & Frydenberg, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2009).

This will be researched in this work to interweave it with theoretical framework as it has the potential to have a significant influence on the outcomes.

A Year 2 class comprising 19 students with various backgrounds is the focus of this study. The researcher has frequently faced the challenge where, during lessons, some children had demonstrated low engagement levels, and after those lessons, the children were achieving low to very-low progress. The goal of this action research is to improve the engagement levels in the classroom in order to be able to adapt to children's needs through increasing the intrinsic motivation to learn, which will hopefully lead to better attainment and behaviour; to widen the existing knowledge about factors influencing engagement, and to increase the arsenal of tools allowing the teacher to detect and increase low engagement levels in general.

Action Research is one of the most beneficial ways to explore this subject as it allows: to 'take action in here'; 'to improve the quality of your thinking'; 'to improve the quality of your interactions with others, who you hope are doing the same as you' (McNiff, 2016, p. 9). Another advantage of this is that Action Research is always done in interaction with other people, so the knowledge created is knowledge of practices, that is, how professionals work with others to ensure that what they say and do, and how they interact, will be for the benefit of all.

Literature review

There is a wide variety of literature dedicated to student engagement as this topic has enjoyed a considerable amount of attention amongst teaching practitioners. This attention could be caused by a noticeable interlink between engagement and sound student attainment in a subset of available educational literature. According to Macfarlane and Tomlinson (2017), at a policy level, 'student engagement' is attracting increasing attention internationally as a core element of institutional learning and teaching strategies and through national student engagement surveys in most developed higher education systems.

Theoretical framework

There is a sound body of literature dedicated to the concept of 'student engagement'. It is evident (and noted by some authors) that there is confusion in understanding what the term 'engagement' means. Existing literature contains definitions that appear to be very different, and there is no agreed understanding which might contribute to debates and misconceptions (Trowler, 2010; Evans et al., 2015). Some authors emphasise desirable outcomes - engagement has been defined as participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes (Kuh et al., 2007). While other authors believe that participation is not sufficient, they see emotions as a cornerstone of engagement (Harper & Quaye, 2009). The National Survey of Student Engagement (The NSSE) defines it as 'student behaviors highly correlated with desirable learning and personal development outcomes.', and this definition highlights behaviour. Although it mostly measures engagement in higher institutions, it is arguably still applicable to schools (as engagement in education). To measure engagement, it used the following engagement indicators (The NSSE, 2022):

- Academic Challenge
- Learning with Peers
- Experience with Faculty
- Campus environment

The above discrepancies in attempts to define the concept led the stream of literature down the 'segmentation' path. The research of relevant literature (Groccia, 2018; Axelson & Flick, 2011; Kuh et al, 2009, Kahu, 2013) resulted in the identification of the following elements believed to comprise engagement:

- Behavioural engagement - time and effort, interaction, participation.
- Emotional engagement – interest, enthusiasm and belonging.
- Cognitive engagement – deep learning, self-regulation.

Engagement vs Motivation

Some authors see engagement and motivation as two threads interwoven together (Ryan & Deci, 2010; Schlechty, 2002; Zyngier, 2011; Woolfolk & Margetts, 2007). Ryan and Deci (2000, p. 54) perceived motivation as, 'To be motivated means to be moved to do something. A person who feels no impetus or inspiration to act is thus characterized as unmotivated, whereas someone who is energized or activated toward an end is considered motivated.'. This definition might lead to an idea that, when attempting to define motivation in education, it could be seen as the degree to which a student demonstrates concentration on, and level of the effort engaged towards performing a task. Motivation has been highlighted as an integral part of successful learning, and some papers state that a high level of engagement may not be possible without motivation (Sternberg, 2005). In his book, Marsh (2000) notices that if a class teacher is able to underpin their classroom by knowledge of motivation levels and how to increase them, they will have a higher success rate in engaging learners into the educational process.

The literature recognises two types of motivation: extrinsic ('i.e., originating from outside of the self-task') and intrinsic ('i.e., inherent to the task') - Corpus, McClintic-Gilbert and Hayenga (2009). Many studies demonstrate that high intrinsic motivation levels lead to 'higher achievement levels, lower levels of anxiety and higher perceptions of competence and engagement in learning than students who are not intrinsically motivated' (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). However, it is impossible for the whole class to have constant high intrinsic motivation levels; that is why teachers are encouraged to use extrinsic motivation in their classroom (punishment and rewards, golden time, verbal praise, etc.).

Identifying levels of engagement

'For a **truly engaged** learner, the joy of learning inspires a persistence to accomplish the desired goals even in the face of difficulty.' (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012, p. 253). Determining whether a student is engaged or not might be challenging. Most sources rely on 'visible' criteria, whilst some sources recognise that engagement might be 'covered' – i.e., the student might be looking outside the window and appear 'spaced' and be engaged at the same time (Newmann, 1986). Based on Newmann's work, McMahon & Zyngier (2009) noted that engagement is '"…difficult to define operationally, but we know it when we see it, and we know it when it is missing (Newmann, 1986, 242)." The literature demonstrates that self-report and observations (progress assessment) are the most effective methods to determine engagement levels (Christenson S. et al. (2012); Fredricks & McColskey, 2010;). The following parameters are measured to assess engagement (Pedler et al., 2020):

- 'Behavioural engagement includes effort, persistence, attention, asking questions, participation, following rules, and the absence of disruptive behaviours (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 62).
- Emotional engagement includes affective reactions in the classroom, such as boredom, happiness, sadness, anxiety, identification with school (aka belonging), and liking or disliking school (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 63).
- Cognitive engagement includes investment in learning, self-regulation, preference for challenge and hard work, going beyond requirements, effort in mastering new knowledge and skills and using learning strategies (Fredricks et al., 2004, p. 64).

In terms of this tri-dimensional understanding, Fredricks et al. (2004, p. 65) explain that student engagement: 'has the potential to link areas of research about antecedents and consequences of how students behave, how they feel, and how they think. Ultimately, although engagement might begin with liking or participating, it can result in commitment or investment and thus may be a key to diminishing student apathy and enhancing learning'.

The issue is that most literature relies on 'visible' engagement; however, students might present signs of low participation but still be cognitively and emotionally engaged (O'Connor et al., 2017).

Practical knowledge

As literature lacks a settled definition, the instruments applied by researchers to increase 'it' (it significantly depends on how a researcher defines 'engagement') appear to be general at times and reliant on behaviour management. However, being of a complex nature, engagement should be addressed in a holistic way. The research has shown the following instruments, deriving from the theory of engagement, allow to address the components of the engagement that are dipping down (Zepeke & Leach, 2010):

Emotional - these methods of increasing engagement levels are believed to be appropriate for children struggling with low self-esteem; classroom relationship management, etc:

- 'Enhance students' self-belief.
- Create learning that is collaborative and fosters learning relationships.
- Promoting relationships with others and feeling competent to achieve their objectives.
- Ensure institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds.
- Adapt to changing student expectations.
- Enable students to become active citizens.
- Enable students to develop their social and cultural capital.

Cognitive – these methods of increasing engagement levels are designed to stimulate students' intellectual abilities and ignite curiosity:

- Enable students to work autonomously, enjoy learning;
- Creating learning that is active;
- Create educational experiences for students that are challenging, enriching and extend their academic abilities;
- Invest in a variety of support services;

Behavioural– these methods of increasing engagement levels are believed to be appropriate for cases where behaviour impedes attainment:

- Enforcing the classroom and school rules;
- Making expectations clear for everyone.

The above-mentioned methods are not extensive; however for the purpose of this action research they should be sufficient to initiate the explorative process. Within this research, several of the above methods are going to be applied to address the issues that will be pinned during the data collection stage.

Ethical considerations

Children will not be questioned or approached. The research will be performed in compliance with 'BERA Guidelines', 2018. It will be conducted such that privacy, autonomy, diversity, values and dignity of students and teachers are respected. All the interviews and observations will be performed with teachers' consent, and they always will be granted the right to withdraw from participation in this research. The research will be performed anonymously – meaning that participants and the place involved will be anonymised. The impartiality will be observed. This research is to be performed to the highest standards to facilitate the protection of integrity and reputation. No participants will be unjustifiably criticised. Should the malpractice be identified – the appropriate individuals/organisations will be contacted. No plagiarism will be involved. Only recognising authors/sources will be used as data for this study. The researcher will endeavour to make the data and methods amenable to proper external scrutiny should they be required. The language used is to be concise and follow a straightforward pattern. The language is to be adapted to the audience, which, in this case, is academic. Should some of the data be in another language, all the data will be translated into the English language. No sensitive information is to be included. All the citations will be labelled and described in an appropriate manner. No co-researchers will be involved. The data will be collected on a 'no-incentives-involved' basis except for minor incentives for interviews (i.e., a cup of tea or coffee). No foreseeable potential harm is anticipated.

Data collection : Methods, Results & Analysis

Cycle 1

Context, Methods and Problem

In this cycle, Y2 class of an independent British school was observed for the period of 2 weeks during Maths, English, Art & DT and Science lessons. During teaching, the researcher has observed several children appearing not to be engaged in various lessons which affected their attainment and potentially caused behavioural issues.

The main focus of this stage was to identify children making the least progress most of the time due to appearing to be 'the least engaged' based on the existing knowledge of the Researcher by using:

- Observation (including 'noticing' – Mason 2002)
- Interview
- Logging and using a diary.

The main goal for this cycle was to identify what is happening inside the classroom in terms of student engagement. For this stage, one of the chosen methods was observation. As McNiff (2017) noted, 'In the sense, all research begins with observation….', the researcher needs to observe a set of things occurring in different settings. The purpose of the observation was to detect and record the activities of children to single out the ones with the lowest engagement and attainment. This cycle also includes shallow hypothesising the roots of the low engagement (i.e. which segment was affected: behavioural, emotional or cognitive). The following table was used to perform the research through this method (questions were inspired by Moore et al. 2005; Zyngier, 2009; Pedler et al., 2020):

Table 1. Observation Sheet 1

Subject:		Date:				
Child	The child follows school/classroom rules	The child performs the tasks independently	Attempts to avoid learning	The child discusses the learnt material with their peers	The child seeks ways to explore studied material	The child listens to what the teacher says
Child 1						
Child 2						
Child 3						
Child 4						
Child 5						
Child 6						
Child 7						
Child 8						
Child 9						
Child 10						
Child 11						
Child 12						
Child 13						
Child 14						
Child 15						
Child 16						
Child 17						
Child 18						
Child 19						
Legend:	Y - yes, in most cases AV - 50% yes, 50% no N - no, in most cases					

Another method employed at this stage was interviewing the teaching assistant and specialists to increase the accuracy. The following questions were asked to identify students with low engagement.

1. Whom would you consider to be the student(s) having the lowest level of engagement in this class? Why?
2. Have you noticed any triggers of low engagement (for struggling students identified in Q.1)?
3. What signs of low engagement are they showing?
4. Does it affect their attainment?
5. Does the engagement level of these children fluctuate or remain more or less stable?

All extra observations were recorded in a diary as recommended by McNiff (2017).

Fact Finding
Two children in the class demonstrated very low engagement levels (which also coincided with low attainment and progress levels). They were following the school rules in most cases but employed various evasive techniques not to perform the tasks / follow the instructions given by the teacher. They did not perform any tasks independently and required the teacher/teaching assistant to be 'on top' to achieve at least some progress. They rarely demonstrated interest in the material delivered by the teacher and failed at keeping their attention on the teacher/task. They rarely asked for support and preferred to sit still and wait until the lesson was over, achieving almost no progress at their work.

Other children demonstrated fluctuating middle-to-high levels of engagement. They showed independence in performing tasks, and performed attempts to participate in lessons either by raising hands or contributing within a group.

Plan
The next steps to address the issue would be to identify triggers of the low engagement by:

1. Analysing emotional involvement, i.e. satisfaction with school.
2. Analysing cognitive involvement, i.e. investment in learning and correlation with material accessibility.
3. Analysing behavioural involvement, i.e. misbehaviour and efforts.

Implementation cycle 1
The cycle is to be implemented by performing research on engagement components, doing extra observations and data logging, interviewing, having a diary, analysing the mentor's observation and shadowing more experienced colleagues to identify the next steps.

Analysis and discussions
In this cycle, the main goal was to identify low engagement and to make preliminary predictions on its rooting. The main identifying questions were chosen in accordance with Kuh et al. (2007); Pedler et al. (2020), etc.

Both children have demonstrated 'a dip' in the behavioural dimension of engagement by not following school rules on performing the task (Pedler et al., 2020).

They also demonstrated signs of pluming cognitive side of engagement as, if tied with Fredricks' definition of cognitive engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004), there was no intention to invest in learning (they were choosing to avoid tasks and input), no preference for challenge and hard work (they prefer doing nothing unless were supervised).

The next step would be to understand the root cause of the low engagement by observing them and evaluating the 'missing pieces'.

Cycle 2

Context and Methods
The main purpose of this cycle is to identify the main 'triggers' of low engagement level, and to find appropriate mechanisms to address them. Children will be observed for one week.

For this cycle, data logging is selected to record the circumstances pertaining to plunging engagement. It helps in illustrating 'thick' descriptions that show the complexities of a situation rather than 'thin' descriptions that present it as unproblematic'. The researcher will have a diary, which will allow them to record some thoughts and events and to perform a wholesome analysis of the records at a later stage.

Observation, having benefits described in Cycle 1, plays a vital role in identifying segments of engagement. It will be enacted from a different perspective (please see Observation Sheet 2). According to Moore et al. (2005), behavioral engagement most commonly has been assessed through teacher and student self-report questionnaires and **observational methods**; emotional engagement has been measured through student self-report surveys. Cognitive engagement has been assessed using self-report questionnaires of strategy use and self-regulation and **classroom observations**. In addition, parent surveys have been used as general measures of school engagement.

In addition, the researcher will gather qualitative data by estimating how many tasks are performed by children independently and successfully.

This time, instead of general engagement identifying questions, more specific criteria will be tested to detect the trigger for low engagement levels (inspired by theories of Laevers (2015), Pedler et al. (2020); Kuh (2009); Fredricks et al. (2004); O'Connor et al.(2017)).

Table 2. Observation Sheet 2

Subject:		Date:
Child	Child 1	Child 2
Is the material accessible enough for the student? i.e. does the child understand the task independently? Does the child have the vocabulary to understand the lesson input? Does the child have the skills required to perform the task?		
Behavioural record?		
Does the child have established positive in-classroom relationship?		
Does the child's friend(s) show similar engagament level?		
Is the child hungry? Wants to go to the toilet? Feels unwell?		
Does the child pay attention to the teacher?		
Are there any attempts to participate in the lesson?		
Does the child appear overwhelmed?		
Does the child appear restless during input time? If yes, what time does it start?		
Are there any registered concerns (SEND; CPOMS)?		
Does the child appear satisifed with the school setting?		

In addition, more experienced colleagues will be observed and shadowed to contribute to future action planning.

Data collection

Child 1 showed a deficient social engagement level. They have not established any positive relationship within the classroom. The child did not show any unsatisfied 'essential' needs (I.e. wanting to go to the toilet, being hungry, feeling unwell, etc.) – test for the 'Leuven Scale' (Laevers, 2015). The child appeared happy during playtime and, during a PSHE lesson, stated that they enjoyed school. The child rarely showed attempts to participate in any lessons, with the only exception being maths. There are records of demonstrating defiant and disrespectful behaviour towards staff when being pushed to do tasks. There is a minimal language barrier (but it is insignificant as tasks and input are still accessible). 0% - 15% of tasks on average are performed independently and successfully, and the child shows no visible interest in them. On average, 40%-50% of tasks are performed under supervision successfully by the end of the lesson.

During maths lessons, the child does not appear to be 'visibly' engaged in the input. However, there are occasional attempts to contribute. Independent work is usually performed independently, with most of the tasks being successfully completed. 50-70% of tasks are performed independently successfully (the interest is present).

Child 2 demonstrated good social skills – they have several friends within the class. Their friends show better engagement. There is an evident language barrier – by working with the child, the Researcher estimates the child can access 50-60% of the material. The child sometimes pays attention to the teacher but quickly switches the attention to something external (plays with objects). 0%-10% of tasks are performed independently and successfully (with minimal to no interest), and 20%-30% are performed with the guidance by the end of the lesson.

The more experienced colleagues were interviewed and observed to identify possible triggers and outline the step-plan to address the issue.

Analysis and discussions

In this cycle, Child 1 has clearly demonstrated low emotional engagement levels**.** Based on Fredericks (2004), Taylor et al. (2016), Pedler et al. (2020), student collaboration and self-belief are important dimensions of student engagement. In this case, Child 1 had no established relationship and stayed out of social interactions. To address this issue, based on Zepeke, Leach (2010) and Taylor et al. (2020), measures to promote student interaction will be introduced, such as giving the student 'group' tasks – i.e. handing out papers, assigning roles, choosing the next person in a game, which should go hand in hand with partnering with more social and engaged peers. Praising effort might help to increase self-belief (according to Zepeke, Leach (2010). The tasks will be introduced gradually to avoid the child feeling overwhelmed and pressured (to avoid behavioural issues). Their success in Maths could be counted as a piece of evidence towards the presence of 'latent' engagement (O'Connor et al., 2017).

Child 2 has shown a dipping cognitive side – based on Groccia, 2018; Axelson and Flick, 2011; Kuh et al., 2009, Kahu 2013. The tasks and interaction were impeded by the material being not accessible due to the evident language barrier. According to Dotter & Lowe (2011), engagement can be improved by changes in the nature of tasks and assessments. The best solution is to the make material more accessible and differentiated, where this is not possible – to supervise and explain the missing words and provide the child with the dictionary.

Planning

For Child 1, it was planned:

1) To employ technics enhancing interactions (giving the student more 'team' responsibility – i.e., handing out papers, partnering with more social and engaged peers).
2) Enhance student 'self-belief' (i.e., praise for effort, public praise, allowing to respond one-to-one and integrate the response into the lesson).

For Child 2, it was planned:
1) To partner the child with highly engaged children.
2) To modify the independent work material, where necessary, to simplify the vocabulary.
3) To split the large tasks into smaller chunks.

Cycle 3

Context and Methods
This is the implementation phase of this action research. The measures will be introduced, and children will be observed for three weeks.

Methods of data logging and observations will be utilised to assess the effectiveness. The Observation Sheet 1 is going to estimate the effect of the measures. The completion of tasks will be assessed and measured (how tasks are completed? Independently?). Extra research will be undertaken to identify the next steps if necessary.

Data collection
Child 1 showed an increase in their engagement level. The child makes an effort to participate in the lessons (they raise their hand and perform tasks independently almost every other lesson). They still require extra supervision, and at times, there are dips in their engagement levels. Overall, the engagement rose, which can also be observed by the rise in their attainment; in most subjects (except for maths, where the attainment and progress were generally good), the child completed 30%-60% of tasks independently and successfully. It was also noted that fewer behaviour incidents have occurred in this three-week period.

Child 2 had a slight increase in their engagement. They were more 'present' during the lesson; they had several attempts to perform tasks independently. They showed more interest in assignments spitted into parts. They still required supervision, but the tasks were completed at a better pace 50% to 80% of the tasks were completed by the end of the lesson with at least 15% being performed independently. Additional observation: there were several successful attempts initiated by Child 1 to start conversations with peers to seek advice on the task (i.e. 'brain-storming).

Reflection
Although the methods employed appear to work – which aligns with Pedler at all (2020) and Taylor at all (2016), it is essential to consider that they might have a temporary effect as not all dimensions of the engagement are at a high level in these children. This means that if they are not addressed, potentially, the engagement might roll back to the initial level.

Given that children do not feel confident in performing the tasks independently but enjoy performing them when supervised, it is crucial to concentrate on increasing their independence levels and promoting collaboration with peers (following Fredrick et al., 2004; Taylor et al., 2016; Dotter & Lowe, 2011).

Future steps
The next steps for these children would be reducing the guidance and enhancing independence. Furthermore, methods to gain deeper insight into the root cause of the children's lack of engagement could lead to a more permanent plan to increase engagement.

Conclusion
The main problem that exists in the body of literature on engagement is the lack of a settled definition. Several authors even mention the necessity to come to a unified definition; however, the mentioned works do not propose one (Kahu, 2013; Fredricks et al., 2004; Batwait, 2018). Given that researchers see it differently, it affects the way it is approached and identified.

The research has shown that student engagement has more effect on test outcomes compared to initial test marks or time of studying (Taylor et al., 2016). In addition, it influences behaviour and attendance (Rush & Balamotsou, 2006; Miranda-Zapada et al., 2018). Despite this fact, student engagement is frequently underestimated, and low engagement is sometimes seen as 'behavioural issue' (Batwait, P. 2018).

In this action research, the increase in student attainment led to better progress, a reduction in behavioural incidents, and a positive income on the social life of the students.

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