Encouraging Positive Student Engagement and Motivation: Tips for Teachers

Tammy L. Stephens, Ph.D.,

Motivating students is one of the major challenges teachers face on a daily basis. Conceptualized as students' energy and drive to engage, learn, work effectively, and achieve their potential at school, motivation and engagement play a large role in students' interest and enjoyment of school Understandably, both also play huge roles in academic achievement. Consequently, those students who are motivated by and engaged in learning tend to perform considerably higher academically and are better behaved than unmotivated and un-engaged peers. While much motivation is intrinsic to the student, teachers also play a vital role in the motivation and engagement of their students. A significant portion of student engagement and achievement has been explained by teacher- and classroom-level variables. Motivation and engagement on student learning and behavior is very important and the role teachers play in motivating and engaging students is as well.

Student Engagement and Motivation: Impact on Learning and Behavior

Student engagement is described as the tendency to be behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively involved in academic activities. It is a key construct in motivation research. Compared to less engaged peers, engaged students demonstrate more effort, experience more positive emotions and pay more attention in the classroom. Engagement has also been associated with positive student outcomes, including higher grades and decreased dropouts.

Teachers' Impact on Student Engagement and Motivation

Teachers play a vital role in their students' engagement and motivation. Although much is intrinsic to the student, research has found that teacher's play a vital role on their students' motivation and engagement. It was found that a teacher's enjoyment and confidence in teaching, has a positive impact on student engagement and motivation. Those teachers who are confident, or self-efficient have demonstrated: a) the ability to generate and test alternative courses of action when initial success is not met; b) enhanced functioning through elevated levels of effort and persistence; and c) enhanced ability to deal with a problem situation by influencing cognitive

and emotional processes related to the situation. Teachers with low confidence tend to dwell on their deficiencies and view situations as more difficult than they really are. Teachers high in confidence (self-efficacy) are more likely to engage in pedagogy that is characterized by positive, proactive, and solution-focused orientations, resulting in increased student motivation and engagement.

Teachers' enjoyment of and confidence in teaching have been shown to positively impact their affective orientation towards their students (e.g., positive student-teacher relationships); resulting in increased student motivation and engagement. Students who believe their teacher is caring also believe they learn more. Further, positive relationships with teachers predict enhanced social, cognitive, and language development in younger children. Those teachers who support a student's autonomy tend to facilitate greater motivation, curiosity, and desire to be challenged. Finally, positive relationships with teachers are associated with emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement in the class.

Tips for Enhancing Student Engagement and Motivation

The following tips are provided in an effort to provide teachers with suggestions on how they might proactively begin the school year in an effort to improve and cultivate student motivation and engagement.

- *Recognize and enhance one's mental and physical stability*. Teaching is a stressful job, and it is imperative that teachers take care of their mental and physical selves. Teachers should engage in activities that are relaxing and physically challenging. Having an outlet to alleviate stress will radiate within the classroom and positively enhance student-teacher relationships. When teachers feel good about themselves, they have more patience for and better interaction with students. Possible outlets for stress include: yoga, running, work-outs with weights, healthy eating, dance, biking, or meditation.
- *Ensure the classroom environment is welcoming to students from all cultures*. To be engaged, students need to feel that they are in an environment where they are accepted and affirmed. Ensure the classroom is warm and inviting to all.
- *Enhance students' self-belief*. Research shows that students engage when they act as their own learning agents working to achieve goals important to them. They must believe they can learn and know how to deal with failures and learn from those experiences. Incorporate problem-solving activities and provide discussions when failures occur. Allow students control over learning. This helps them develop confidence and commitment to learning.

- *Survey students to obtain information about their likes and dislikes*. Understanding what students like and dislike will provide suggested areas in which teachers can connect with the student (e.g., favorite books, movies, video games). Information collected from the survey can be utilized as a motivator for academic and behavioral engagement or as a means of building rapport with the student (e.g., a topic for conversing).
- *Allow students to work autonomously, enjoy learning relationships with peers, and feel they are competent to reach their goals*. Allowing students to work autonomously and with others, developing their sense of competence, results in increased student motivation. This focuses on the cultivation of intrinsic motivation, which fosters self-determination that leads to engagement.
- *Create learning opportunities that are active, collaborative, and promote learning relationships*.Â Active learning in groups, peer relationships, and social skills are key components to engagement and motivation.
- *Create educational experiences for students that are challenging and enriching and that extend their academic abilities*. Easy learning activities and assignments are not as effective at engaging students as activities and assignments that challenge them. When students are reflecting, questioning, conjecturing, evaluating, and making connections between ideas, they are engaged. Teachers must create rich educational experiences that challenge students' ideas and stretch them as far as they can go.
- *Recognize that teaching and teachers are central to student engagement*. Keeping up with the educational research through involvement in professional development activities (reading journals, attending workshops or webinars, etc) is key for teachers to remain current in the field using effective, research-based strategies, and techniques.

Motivating students and encouraging engagement is not an easy feat for teachers. While much of the motivation is intrinsic to the student, teachers play a vital role and can be proactive in cultivating student engagement. Increased student engagement and motivation is key to academic and behavioral success.