



Indicator: All teachers engage all students (e.g., encourage silent students to participate). (4448)

Explanation: The evidence review suggests that the classroom environment has a significant impact on students' engagement levels in learning. By promoting mastery over performance and by providing a supportive social setting, students will feel more comfortable taking the academic risks and putting in the efforts that will facilitate their own learning. Through curricular and environmental adjustments and options for all students in the classroom, each individual will have a learning experience that best meets their needs, interests, strengths, and challenges?

Questions: How will teachers adapt their curriculum and classroom procedures to best meet the individual needs of students? What supports will be in place to support teachers in this shift? What trainings will be available to help students better differentiate their instruction? What type of feedback will teachers receive about the level of support they provide in their classroom?

Factors that Affect Student Engagement

Every learner has a unique set of strengths, challenges, interests, and needs. What makes the job of teaching so complicated is the task of getting to know each and every student to understand how to meet those needs and interests. Teachers must use this personal knowledge to help engage all of their students in learning. However, many of the factors that affect students' engagement and participation in the classroom are out of the teacher's control. Urdan and Shoenfelder (2006) explain:

Student attitudes towards school and learning can be adversely affected by negative social environments, such as family difficulties or rejection by peers. For these children, teacher support and acceptance plays an especially critical role in compensating for dwindling motivation and self-confidence. (p. 342)

However, the classroom can play a key role in re-engaging students. Turner and Patrick (2004) write that:

... student participation reflects unique interactions between personal factors (e.g., personal goals, achievement histories, and perceptions of goal structures in their seventh grade classroom) and the opportunities and constraints of the classroom context (e.g., their communication with the teacher and with teacher practices). (p. 1781)

Successful engagement requires teachers to address both the academic and social-emotional needs of students. When students feel that they have opportunities to be supported and successful academically and socially, they are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and to ask for help, which is an indicator of engagement (Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Urdan & Shoenfelder, 2006). Social engagement involves not just a student's peers – a student's relationship with his or her teacher is a critical factor in the engagement and success of students. Urdan and Shoenfelder (2006) write that, "Students care about their relationships with their teachers and respond with greater engagement and

effort when they believe that their teachers care about them and are supportive” (p. 340).

Teachers must be mindful of how their practices affect students, and they must be intentional about how they work to engage all students effectively. In addition to their relationships with students, the classroom environment is another influential factor that teachers have within their control. Turner and Patrick (2004) write, “Classroom environments communicate purposes and meanings for engaging in academic tasks to students, and students’ perceptions of these messages are related to how they participate in class” (p. 1762). When the classroom environment is heavily focused on performance – test scores and grades – students were found to be less engaged, more anxious, and avoidant of demonstrating their abilities, for fear of appearing incompetent. Students in performance-driven environments are also more likely to have behavior problems, less likely to seek help from teachers or peers, and are generally lower performing (Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Turner & Patrick, 2004; Urdan & Shoenfelder, 2006).

Teachers should instead encourage mastery of learning objectives, as opposed to grades or seemingly concrete measures of performance, letting students know that making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process. This creates a supportive environment in which all learners feel comfortable. Ryan and Patrick (2001) write that:

...being in an environment where students’ ideas and efforts are respected, with minimal threat of being embarrassed or teased, boosts students’ confidence in their ability to learn, and suggests they devote more cognitive resources to engaging with the tasks in hand. (p. 455)

Urden and Shoenfelder (2006) emphasize that, “By promoting development, improvement, and learning for understanding, educators convey to students that everyone can learn and that the process of learning and developing skills is more important than who gets the best grades on tests” (p. 336).

What is Differentiated Instruction?

Differentiation is typically thought of as a means of providing supports to students with identified special needs, but there is a growing movement to address the unique needs of all learners through more personalized learning environments and experiences. Anderson

(2007) writes that, “By its nature, differentiation implies that the purpose of schools should be to maximize the capabilities of all students” (p. 50). Meo (2008) describes the principle universal design for learning (UDL) as “an approach to designing curricula—including instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments—that are flexible enough from the outset to accommodate learner differences” (p. 22).

Differentiation of instruction can occur on multiple levels, in the adjustment of assignments and instruction to meet varying difficulty levels, interest areas, or learning styles and in the options to working with others or alone or in a different physical space in the classroom (Anderson, 2007). Teachers must identify and get rid of barriers to individual student learning by “building scaffolds, supports, and alternatives” to meet their needs (Meo, 2008), p. 22). Appropriate scaffolding gives students, in a sense, a safety net, which allows them to take the risks they need to truly learn (Urden & Shoenfelder, 2006).

Effective differentiation empowers students to make their own decisions and take ownership of their studies, while providing them with the chance to most effectively demonstrate what they have learned (Turner & Patrick, 2004; Anderson, 2007). Consequently, teachers can better assess the progress students are making and how to best help them reach their learning goals (Turner & Patrick, 2004). When students are receiving work appropriate to their individual level, have a sense of agency over the learning process, and have a supportive teacher guiding them through, they are far more likely to be intrinsically motivated, engaged, and successful (Urden & Shoenfelder, 2006).

Ways Teachers Can Support and Engage All Learners

Above all, teachers need to be reflective about their own demeanor and behaviors, the routines in their classrooms, and the ways in which they try to motivate and engage students. Simple efforts on a teachers’ part, such as showing affection to students, having a sense of humor, being enthusiastic about learning, and making their support of students individualized and evident, make a tremendous difference for students (Turner & Patrick, 2004; Urden & Shoenfelder, 2006). When students feel that their efforts are recognized and appreciated and when they have an opportunity to interact positively and meaningfully with their peers and teacher, they are far more likely to stay engaged (Turner & Patrick, 2004).

Utilizing the principles of UDL, teachers can flexibly adapt their instruction and the environment to best meet the needs of each of the children in their classroom. A shift from a performance-orientation, in which feedback consists of a single letter or score, to a mastery-orientation, in which feedback is constructive, useful, and ongoing, is critical for making the learning environment more welcoming for all students (Urduan & Schoenfelder, 2006). These academic accommodations and social supports will lead to greater and more authentic classroom engagement.

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