



**School Practitioner
Listserv**



**A Weekly Community of Practice Network
for Sharing and Interchange**

August 24, 2015

*Special Edition:
Engaging and Re-engaging Students with Disabilities*

Request from a Colleague

>Needed: Strategies to enhance engagement of students with disabilities

>Responses from the Center and from the field

Featured Set of Center Resources

>Applying school engagement/motivation strategies to address barriers to learning

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Please forward this to a few colleagues you think might be interested. The more who join, the more we are likely to receive to share.

For those who have been forwarded this and want to be part of the weekly exchange, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

For previous recent postings of this community of practice, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/practitioner.htm>

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Note: In keeping with the 2015 National Initiative for Transforming Student & Learning Supports,* this community of practice network has expanded in number of participants and topics discussed.* The thematic emphasis is on (1) daily concerns confronting those working in and with schools, (2) the transformation of student and learning supports, and (3) promoting whole child development and positive school climate.

Rquest: “I work with students with learning problems and am looking for information on engagement in school and in learning for students with disabilities.”

Center Response: All efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching involve concerns about student motivation and include not only a focus on engagement, but also on re-engaging disconnected students. (Disengagement, of course, is associated with learning and behavior problems may eventually lead to dropout.)

Research stresses that engagement is higher in classrooms with supportive teachers and peers, challenging and authentic tasks, opportunities for choice, and sufficient structure. From a psychological perspective, self-determination theory emphasizes that engagement is associated with learning conditions that promote *feelings* of competence, self-determination, and/or relatedness to valued others and that minimize threats to such feelings.

With respect to students manifesting learning, behavior, and emotional problems, there is particular concern about psychological reactance and disengagement. Concern about reactance leads to giving special attention to minimizing processes that limit options and make students feel controlled and coerced; re-engagement depends on use of interventions that help minimize conditions that negatively affect intrinsic motivation and maximize conditions that have a positive intrinsic motivational effect.

Most pre and inservice preparation programs for educators primarily teach student engagement and classroom management in extrinsic motivation terms (i.e., reinforcement concepts, behavior modification). This is unfortunate given that the key to addressing student engagement and disengagement is an appreciation of intrinsic motivation.

Overreliance on extrinsic motivation risks undermining efforts to enhance intrinsic motivation and can produce avoidance reactions in the classroom and to school and, thus, can reduce opportunities for positive learning and for development of positive attitudes. Over time, such practices result in too many students disengaging from classroom learning.

Engaging and re-engaging students involves much more than effectively using rewards and consequences. A broader understanding of motivation clarifies how essential it is to build on and enhance self-determination and avoid processes that undermine it.

Featured in the last section of this *Practitioner* are Center resources related to enhancing intrinsic motivation for engagement in learning, addressing barriers to learning, and re-engaging disconnected students.

Response from the Field:

Most of the school-related research and practice literature on engagement and disengagement focuses on regular education. In many instances, the practices recommended can be readily adapted to students with disabilities. Here are two examples where folks focused specifically on disabilities:

- >Promoting the Self-Determination and Goal Attainment of Youth with Learning Disabilities and Behavioral Disorders (2015) by M.L. Wehmeyer, K.A. Shogren, & H. Seo. In B.G. Cook, M. Tankersley, & T.J. Landrum (eds.) *Transition of Youth and Young Adults* (Advances in Learning and Behavioral Disabilities, Volume 28) Emerald Group Publishing Limited, pp.173 - 196.

<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/book/10.1108/S0735-004X201528>

Abstract: Promoting the self-determination of youth and young adults with disabilities has become best practice in the field of special education. Such efforts have been shown to positively impact student educational goal attainment, access to the general education curriculum, student involvement in educational and transition planning, and more positive postschool outcomes. This chapter discusses the self-determination construct, reviews the literature pertaining to what is known about promoting self-determination and goal attainment,

and introduces assessments, evidence-based practices, and strategies for promoting student involvement.

>School Engagement of Youth with Disabilities (2003) by L. Newman, E. Davies, & C. Marder – http://www.nlts2.org/reports/2003_11/nlts2_report_2003_11_ch3.pdf

Excerpt: “Policy-makers, educators, and researchers agree that students who participate actively in and enjoy school are more likely to experience educational success Students need reasons to be enthusiastic about and dedicated to school, particularly over the secondary school years, when dropping out becomes problematic. Students who ... struggle to meet academic or behavioral expectations while in the classroom may experience repeated embarrassment or failure, which in turn may lead to diminished satisfaction and interest in school.

Many students with disabilities have characteristics and experiences that put them at risk for disengagement from school. Students with disabilities may miss more school than other students because of factors associated with their disability. Teachers may have lower expectations for them than for other students, resulting in their receiving fewer opportunities and less encouragement to participate in stimulating or challenging classroom activities. Some have disabilities that may make it difficult to sustain attention to school tasks.

Fortunately, unlike some other student characteristics (e.g., demographics or disability category), a student’s level of engagement at school can be modified by external influences, such as teachers’ behaviors, the school climate, and attitudes of parents and peers. Students who are made to feel welcome at school and who are given opportunities and encouraged to excel may be fully engaged, despite academic disadvantages....

School program factors. Several aspects of the school programs of youth with disabilities are related to their school engagement.... Greater inclusion in general education academic classes and taking one or more vocational education courses are related to lower average absenteeism for students with disabilities....

Other school experiences. Strong relationships exist between students’ current school engagement and a variety of current and past experiences with school.... Those who have been retained at grade level at some time in their school careers receive lower general education academic and special education classroom engagement scores, other differences held constant. Students who have been subject to disciplinary action or an in-school suspension are estimated to miss 7 more days of school per year other than for suspensions or expulsions and to have lower behavior scale ratings in all types of classes than those who have not had such problems. Changing schools frequently for reasons other than grade-level progression also is associated with greater absenteeism; students who have changed schools three times miss an estimated 4 days more of school per year than those who have made no changes, other things being equal. Conversely, some school experiences are related to lower rates of absenteeism, including belonging to school groups. In this respect, youth with disabilities are similar to their peers in the general population, where participation in extracurricular activities is associated with increased school engagement. Group participation usually is elective; students choose to participate in school groups because they enjoy the activities that are the focus of the groups (e.g., drama, sports)....”

To start off the Community of Practice interchange, we contacted a number of researchers/practitioners who focus on student engagement. Here are the first two responses:

- (1) “Regarding your question, my current research looks at different ‘sub-population profiles’ of student engagement, with the idea that ‘one size fits all’ approaches to promoting engagement and reducing disengagement are probably destined to fall short of their desired outcomes. So I am hesitant to reply in a way that would imply that any one strategy would work for kids who may have a different array of learning and/or behavioral challenges.

Anyhow, in my practice work, I always tried to engage youngsters and their parents in activities that were grounded in their existing strengths and interests. The idea was that in order to alter any behavioral difficulties that were occurring in the school or classroom, I needed to first change the setting that was giving rise to those behaviors. So, I would do things like try to get permission from a teacher to take a kid outside of the classroom to do some work (however defined). I always found that was better than trying to re-direct a kid to a task that she/he was not willing or able to do. (and of course, you all have highlighted that need in spades in the Enabling Component model). Over time, that general strategy contributed to a sequence of practice principles that I tried to employ in my work with students in schools:

- >Develop a caring, individual relationship with each student that is rooted in their strengths and interests.
- >Foster a sense of industriousness with each student (i.e., help the student feel like they are able and willing to do ‘work’ – this is especially important for students who have low efficacy AND have been told that they are lazy)
- >Foster a sense of efficacy in each student (i.e., help the student develop a sense that they can do any task well – this is often a pre-requisite to doing the DESIRED task well)
- >Help the student relate their successes and learning doing a non-academic task (or an academic task from a different discipline) to the current assignment/scope of work.
- >Involve and integrate other students into each of the above activities (i.e., Try to make individual engagement a collective experience).”

(2) “Sometimes it is helpful to consider student motivation to be the product of the value the student places on the activity (V) times the student’s estimation of success (S%). $M=(V)(S\%)$. If the student doesn’t think the lesson carries any value, motivation is low. If the student believes the lesson is very difficult and it is unlikely the student would do well, motivation is low. If the student really wants to learn something, but the lesson progresses in steps that are too large and new material is presented too quickly, motivation is low. On the other hand, if the value is low, but the work looks like something that can be easily mastered, motivation is a bit higher.

- >Using student skills and interests is often a good place to start. If the student is a graffiti artist who hates to write an essay or give an oral presentation, why not accept a work of art for grading?
- >Doing useful work valued by the community at large is usually preferable to busy work (that may have a long-term benefit but no discernible immediate value.) I remember a class for students with behavior disorders that made and sold holiday wreaths to raise money for field trips. When the students were actively designing, assembling, and selling their artistic creations, problems were few. During this time, they received a lot of recognition for their work instead of complaints about their poor reading/math skills, or frequent suspensions.
- >I worry that our system of identifying students as being too unusual for regular classrooms and placing them in classrooms that are supposed to be “special” in some way unnecessarily creates stigma. Why should students who have been rejected - and perhaps humiliated by this rejection - want to do well or participate enthusiastically?

I recall a middle school that could not tolerate a student with a bi-polar disorder who was prone to manic periods of excessive worry/panic. Walking it off seemed to help, but there was “no way” the school could permit her pacing and muttering to herself. It was sit still and be quiet or be suspended for not following teacher directives to sit still and be quiet. A more accepting classroom environment would have done much to reduce those uncomfortable times. Whatever you can do to promote the notion that all of our students are our students may be a big challenge, but I think it might pay dividends.

- >Get to know the families, if you can. Some of the most disturbing students I have seen had their ‘bad days’ at school when something awful was happening at home. If you could build a sufficient trusting relationship with the families, then they could give you some advance warning and you could meet the student and deal with the stresses before that student entered a classroom and blew up.
- >Find other, more experienced educators who run programs similar to yours and see if you can get a mentoring relationship going with them. Most schools have school psychologists assigned the the building on a regular (though perhaps infrequent) basis. Lean on that person for some new ideas.
- >Make sure you schedule some time for yourself to recharge your batteries, have some fun, get some exercise, etc. People who give and give are prone to neglecting their own needs. If you don’t take good care of yourself, you can burn out and then be on no value to anybody.
- > I recommend this resource: *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement*
Editors: Sandra L. Christenson, Amy L. Reschly, Cathy Wylie. Springer Science & Business Media, 2012

Listserv participants: What points and resources do you want to add? What’s the same and what is different in focusing on engagement with students identified as having disabilities? Let us hear from you so we can share more with others. Send to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Featured set of center resources:

>Applying school engagement/motivation strategies to address barriers to learning

See the Center’s online clearinghouse Quick Find on

- *Engagement and Motivation* <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/motiv.htm>

This Quick find contains direct links to resources the Center has developed and to a sample of other online resources.

Below are some of the Center resources listed there:

- >*Personalizing Classroom Instruction to Account for Motivational and Developmental Differences*
- >*Engaging and Re-engaging Students and Families: Four Units for Continuing Education*
- >*Engaging and Re-engaging Students in Learning at School*
- >*Engaging and Re-engaging Families When a Student is Not Doing Well*
- >*Enhancing Classroom Teachers' Capacity to Successfully Engage All Students in Learning: It's the Foundation of Learning Supports*
- >*The Role of School and Home in Promoting Student Engagement*
- >*About School Engagement and Re-Engagement*
- >*School Engagement, Disengagement, Learning Supports, & School Climate*
- >*Rethinking How Schools Address Student Misbehavior & Disengagement*
- >*Concerns = Opportunities: Addressing Student Disengagement, Acting Out, and Dropouts*
- >*School Engagement, Disengagement, Learning Supports, & School Climate*
- >*About Intrinsic Motivation from the Perspective of Self-determination Theory*

Links also are there to

- >National Center for School Engagement
- >Self-Determination Theory: An Approach to Human Motivation – (Ed Deci's website)
- >Pace University’s website for *Understanding and Engaging Students with Disabilities*

*For information about the *2015 National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports*, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

***Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;
transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to
enabling equity of opportunity and promoting whole child development***

Please share relevant resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences!

Send to ltaylor@ucla.edu

Note: Responses come only to our Center at UCLA for possible inclusion in the next week's message.

We also post a broad range of issues and responses to the *Net Exchange* on our website at

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm>

and to *Facebook* -- access from the Center's home page

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>