

# How Strength Based Learning and Choice in Learning Impacts Student Engagement and Motivation

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Innovate Instruction, Ignite Learning!

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## Are Students Engaged?

Among the most influential learning theories of the 20th and 21st centuries is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). A key tenet of Vygotsky's ZPD is that for humans to develop (learning being part of the larger concept of development), they need to interact with content that is just beyond what they can complete independently (Vygotsky, 1997).

# Are Students Engaged?

Vygotsky (1997) posited that instruction targeted at this level would not result in student growth or development because students already have mastered this material; in his words (as translated), “learning which is oriented toward developmental levels that have already been reached is ineffective [because] it does not aim for a new stage of the developmental process but rather lags behind this process” (p. 34). Similarly, Vygotsky (1997) suggested that instruction targeted too far above a student’s current performance also would fail to generate growth because the learner simply is not ready for it; it would be like trying to comprehend a television show in a foreign language one has never heard before.

# Are Students Engaged?

*An instructional system heavily focused on grade-level content essentially ignores the learning needs of a large percentage of its students.* Having established from multiple data sources that large percentage of students are achieving above grade level, educators, researchers, and policy makers need to work together to reconceptualize traditional but outdated grade-based standards, and to consider honestly where and through what mechanism these students are going to be challenged.

# Are Students Engaged?

“We used four data sets (three state-level and one national) from diverse contexts to evaluate how many students perform above grade level in English Language Arts and mathematics. Results revealed that among American elementary and middle school students, 20% to 49% in English Language Arts and 14% to 37% in mathematics scored 1 year or more above grade level. We address what these findings imply for K-12 schools, grouping decisions, and educational policies that strive to foster advanced abilities.”

# Are Students Engaged?

A 2013 Gallup poll of 500,000 students in grades five through 12 found that nearly eight in 10 elementary students were “engaged” with school, that is, attentive, inquisitive, and generally optimistic. By high school, the number dropped to four in 10. A 2015 follow-up study found that less than a third of 11th-graders felt engaged. When Gallup asked teens in 2004 to select the top three words that describe how they feel in school from a list of 14 adjectives, “bored” was chosen most often, by half the students. “Tired” was second, at 42 percent. Only 2 percent said they were never bored. The evidence suggests that, on a daily basis, the vast majority of teenagers seriously contemplate banging their heads against their desks.

# Are Students Engaged? A Progression

An escalating emphasis on standardized tests. Fifth-grade teacher Jill Goldberg, Ed.M.'93, told me, "My freedom as a teacher continues to be curtailed with every passing year. I am not able to teach for the sake of teaching." With lack of teacher freedom comes lack of student freedom, and disengagement and tuning out. **The novelty of school itself fades with each grade.** Here I am for another year in the same blue plastic chair, same graffitied fake wooden desk, surrounded by the same faces. Repetition begets boredom (e.g., I haven't had a Frosty in a decade).

# Are Students Engaged? A Progression

**Lack of motivation.** Associate Professor Jal Mehta (/node/126732) says, “There’s no big external motivating force in American education except for the small fraction of kids who want to go to the most selective colleges.

**”The transition from the tactile and creative to the cerebral and regimented.** Mehta calls it the switch from “child-centered learning to subject-centered learning.” In third grade I cut with scissors, smeared glue sticks, and doodled with scented magic markers. By 12th grade I was plugging in formulas on a TI-83 and writing the answers on fill-in-the-blank worksheets. And research papers stimulate and beget rewards at a thousandth the speed of Snapchat and Instagram



# Are Students Engaged? A Progression

A 2010 German study found that boredom “instigates a desire to escape from the situation” that causes boredom. It’s not surprising, then, that half of high school dropouts cite boredom as their primary motivator for leaving. A 2003 Columbia University survey found that U.S. teenagers who said they were often bored were more than 50 percent more likely than not-bored teens to smoke, drink, and use illegal drugs. Proneness to boredom is also associated with anxiety, impulsiveness, hopelessness, loneliness, gambling, and depression.

# Boredom and Disengagement Can Be Turned Around

- Choice in Learning
- Strength Based Learning

# Choice in Learning

- Giving student real choices in the classroom, having to do with the material they study, the assignments they complete, the peers with whom they work, can boost their engagement, allow them to capitalize on their strengths and enable them to meet their individual learning needs.
- Choice is not free range, choice is typically within a range dependent on the student and the learning activity engaged.

# Choice in Learning

- Students feel competent when they believe they know what to do to be successful and feel capable of mastering challenges.
- To engender competence, students must perceive choosing the task and doing the selected work as appropriately difficult

# Choice in Learning

- Teachers, in exploring choice options, have described to researchers a number of ways in which they provide choice to students; giving them opportunities to choose work partners, seating arrangements, homework problems from a list of problems, assessment problems and ways of being assessed.

# Choice in Learning

Through choice, teachers can guide students to self differentiate their learning so work is more appropriately challenging. Teachers can also combat student apathy, helping students connect with their strengths and interests and giving them more autonomy, power and control over the work they do, building intrinsic motivation.

# Choice In Learning

Inquiry Based Learning (IBL) is connective-ist and constructivist and student-centered (Barron & Darling-Hammond, 2008; Condliffe, Visher, Bangser, Drohojowska & Saco 2016; Duffy & Raymer, 2010; Kuhlthau, Maniotes, & Caspari, 2015), leveraging student motivation and engagement through its grounding in authentic, relevant study (Deci & Ryan, 2016; Saunders-Stewart, Gyles, Shore & Bracewell, 2015). Recent research shows positive academic and achievement gains for students engaged in IBL work and the practice is growing.

# Choice in Learning



# Strength Based Learning

The underlying principles of the strength-based approach include:

- all children have strengths and abilities
- children grow and develop from their strengths and abilities
- the problem is the problem—the child is not the problem

# Strength Based Learning

Though grounded in complex positive psychology research, the strength-based approach boils down to a simple rule: Focus on what students do well. It feels natural to do the opposite, because pulling up areas of weakness can seem like the best way to help children grow, says Lea Waters, a psychology professor at the University of Melbourne, in Australia, and the author of a book called "The Strength Switch." and yet focusing on the traits and skills kids don't have can lead them to become disengaged, Waters says, while focusing on strengths produces greater levels of happiness and engagement at school and higher levels of academic achievement.

# Strength Based Learning

The strength-based approach represents a paradigm shift—a movement away from a deficit-based approach which can lead to a long list of things considered to be ‘wrong’ with a child’s learning and development or things a child cannot do. The deficit-based model fails to provide sufficient information about strengths and strategies to support a child’s learning and development.

## Strength Based Learning

In response to the limitations associated with the deficit-based approach, a growing body of research and evidence has shown support for the strength-based approach that encourages educators to: understand that children's learning is dynamic, complex and holistic and understand that children demonstrate their learning in different ways: Start with what's present—not what's absent—and write about what works for the child.

# Strength Based Learning

The strength-based approach to writing Statements encourages educators to look for:

- what a child can already do
- what a child can do when provided with educational support
- what a child will one day be able to do.

# Strength Based Learning

The strength-based approach can be especially important for students with special needs.

*"We know that people respond infinitely better – both in terms of their continued engagement and motivation, and ultimately their behavior change – when they are approached with a positive lens."*

# Strength Based Learning

## Equity and Diversity

Children's personal, family and cultural histories shape their learning and development. Children learn best when educators respect their diversity and provide them with the best support, opportunities and experiences.

# Strength Based Learning

## Equity and Diversity

What exacerbates this situation even further is the reality that most educators have little to no formal education working with students and families who represent cultural, linguistic, racial, and economic experiences that are distinct from their own (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005; Darling-Hammond & Rothman, 2015).



# Strength Based Learning

## Equity and Diversity

Whether it is working with high or low incidences of people who represent the rapidly growing diversity among U.S. students and their families, most educators tell us what the professional literature has confirmed for years:

Very few in our profession have had any formal training or depth of experience working with the large, growing, and changing population of diverse learners—let alone those living with trauma, violence, and chronic stress.

# Strength Based Learning

## Equity and Diversity

To that end, educators: ensure that the interests, abilities and culture of every child and their family are understood, valued and respected maximize opportunities for every child identify areas where focused support or intervention is required to improve each child's learning and development

# Strength Based Learning

A study included over 1600 students and 90 teachers from three traditional high schools, one traditional middle school and two alternative educational settings within a Midwestern school district with a total enrollment of roughly 20,000 students. Nearly half of the teachers in the study received a strengths-based intervention, a Gallup Seminar called Strengths Spotlight?, focused on giving teachers the resources necessary to help students understand, apply and grow in their areas of greatest potential, their strengths.

# Strength Based Learning

Student and teacher strengths were determined by the Clifton Strengths-Finder<sup>®</sup>, an online assessment based on over 30 years of research on what makes people successful. Pre and post engagement surveys were administered to both teachers and students and responses were collected to analyze the impact of the strengths-based intervention.

# Strength Based Learning

Students in the two alternative educational settings, who had the opportunity to learn about their own strengths and the strengths of others, had more positive perceptions about the school environment. Overall satisfaction, overall engagement, feeling safe, feeling respected, feeling that someone encouraged their development, and feeling like their opinions counted are just a few of the survey items that had meaningful growth from time one to time two within the two alternative educational groups that received strengths-based development.

# Strength Based Learning

The engagement post survey responses of teachers in this study were compared to educational services employees within the employee engagement database of a major consulting organization. Teacher engagement is discussed as the precursor to student engagement. This study shows that sharing strengths among classmates may contribute to the overall feeling of being engaged. The students and teachers in these groups were paying attention to the uniqueness of each person and the positive potential that was within each individual. A focus on the positive aspects of these students was being celebrated and it contributed to their feeling more engaged at school



## Alfie Kohn (2010)

The psychological benefits of control are, if anything, even more pronounced. All else being equal, emotional adjustment is better over time for people who experience a sense of self-determination, by contrast, few things lead more reliably to depression and other forms of psychological distress than a feeling of helplessness...

The truth is that, if we want children to take responsibility for their own behavior, we must first give them responsibility and plenty of it. The way a child learns how to make decisions, is by making decisions, not by following directions.



## Alfie Kohn (2010)

- Net Geners need self directed learning opportunities, interactive environments, multiple forms of feedback and assignment choices that use different resources to create personally meaningful learning experiences. (Barnes, Marateo and Ferris (2007))

# What Does Student Engagement Look Like?

- Dunleavy & Milton (2009) asked students what their ideal school would look like and what learning environment increases engagement. Students listed three criteria that correlate to the concept of interaction: (1) Learn from and with each other and people in their community, (2) Connect with experts and expertise, and (3) Have more opportunities for dialog and conversation.

# Attributes of Engagement *vs. busy or compliant*

Teacher purposefully elicits *all* students to solve a problem, develop a solution, create a tangible product

Involves students actively, not passively, “minds-on,” not just “hands-on” (complex mental tasks)

Invites students to dialogue without choice to opt out (NOT one at a time)

Students work collaboratively

Engagement is *simultaneous and continuous* throughout lesson

# What are the Challenges of Disengagement.

In fact, most educators practically implore transforming education and pedagogy from Kindergarten through post-secondary and strongly believe we fail to meet the needs of students who have grown up in a digital world and are heading into different cultural and economic futures rich in ever-advancing technology and information (Project Tomorrow, 2010).

# What are the Challenges of Disengagement.

- Today's world absolutely requires collaborative critical thinkers, creative and courageous innovators, and true lifelong learners (Prensky, 2005; Tapscott, 1998; Robinson, 2009).

# How to Turn Around Disengagement

Teach Kids How To Think Critically  
and Creatively.

Teachers How To Effectively Engage  
in Inquiry and Problem Based  
Learning.

# How to Turn Around Disengagement

All Kids Can Learn To Be More  
Creative

All Kids Can Learn and Apply Critical  
Thinking Skills

# How to Turn Around Disengagement

All Kids Can Become Problem Solvers  
and Inquirers, When Choice in  
Learning and Strength Based  
Strategies Are Embraced!



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