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Preface

“There are so many things schools can do to help kids think learning is fun. I think kids are naturally inclined to want to learn, but it kind of gets killed off slowly through school.”

While doing my research I have listened to students talk about their experiences in school. The above quote is from a study I conducted comparing youths’ experiences in school and in out-of-school contexts such as arts and sports. For many youths, school is boring, sometimes alienating, and has little relevance to their lives outside of school. Often these students only do what is required to do well on assessments and rarely exert the effort necessary for deep learning and engagement. In contrast, many of these same students report positive affective and behavioral experiences in out-of-school contexts. They talk about being excited, wanting to engage in their extracurricular activity all of the time, and being willing to exert the time and effort necessary to develop their skills in these domains.

I also have sat in classrooms and observed many students. I have seen classrooms in which students were off-task, bored, and using only superficial strategies to regurgitate the material for an upcoming test, seemingly with little hope for deep learning over time. It is painful to sit in these classrooms and know that students are not deeply engaged. On the other hand, I have had the pleasure to be in classrooms where students were actively participating, excited about learning, and using strategies to make deep connections between ideas.

My experiences talking to students and observing classrooms have raised several questions for me. Why is disengagement from

school a shared experience for so many students? What can we learn about out-of-school settings that can be applied to classrooms? What differentiates engaging and disengaging classrooms? How do learning tasks, teacher interactions, and the peer dynamics in the classroom contribute to different levels of engagement? Is it possible to create classroom environments where all students are engaged? The purpose of this book is to tackle these questions.

I initially became an educational researcher because I wanted to create classrooms in which deep learning and engagement take place. Over time, however, I became increasingly frustrated by how disconnected research and practice are. Although the research community has made great advances in the understanding of motivation and engagement, much of this work has had a minimal effect on educational practice. This research is often too technical and complicated. Moreover, it often fails to account for the complex realities that teachers have to face on a day-to-day basis.

I was interested in writing this book because I saw it as a chance to present research in a way that would be accessible to teachers. To help bridge the gap between research and practice, I enlisted the help of three collaborators who teach in ethnically and economically diverse schools. They wrote vignettes describing how the research on engagement applied to their elementary, middle, and high school classrooms. I believe these sections are critical for showing other teachers that it is always possible to create more engaging classroom environments. The teachers also were instrumental in developing a list of resources that other professional educators can use to further their knowledge in each topic area. I believe we have succeeded in creating a book that is accessible to practitioners and that promotes positive change in classrooms. Our hope is that this book will help to create, classroom by classroom, schools in which deep learning and engagement become common shared experiences for students and their teachers.

Introduction

DISENGAGEMENT IN EVERY CLASSROOM

Student disengagement is one of the biggest challenges teachers face each day in their classrooms. This disengagement can take many forms, including lack of participation and effort, acting out and disrupting class, disaffection and withdrawal, and failure to invest deeply in the academic content (e.g., not completing homework, not asking questions). Some educators have erroneously assumed that disengagement is just a problem of low-performing schools and does not apply to their classrooms. However, every school, regardless of its level, location, and demographic characteristics, has students who are disengaged. Recent evidence from national datasets in the United States indicates that as many as 40 percent to 60 percent of students are showing signs of disengagement (Steinberg, Brown, & Dornbush, 1996; Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Nationwide, rates of disengagement are higher among males, youths from an ethnic group other than white or Asian, youths from lower socioeconomic status households, and youths in special education (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). The reality is that students often view academics as boring and having little meaning in their lives. Many go through the motions and only do what is required. Although these students are on-task, or at least appear to be, they are not fully engaged and deeply invested in learning.

Student engagement is a complex but achievable goal for every teacher. This book presents a multidimensional construct of engagement that includes student behavior, emotion, and cognition. The book differs from other “quick guides to engagement” by arguing that it is necessary to consider all three of these

dimensions to truly reach the deeper levels of learning needed for success in today's schools. Many states have adopted the Common Core and Next Generation Science Standards, which are designed to help students develop the knowledge and higher-order thinking skills necessary to be successful in college and high-skilled careers. This book will help K-12 teachers create the kind of environments of deep learning and engagement that are necessary to meet these new standards. Throughout this book, elementary, middle level, and high school teachers share their approaches for engaging students in a variety of ways that are supported by the research literature.

What's so important about engagement? There are several reasons why teachers at all levels should be concerned about the high levels of disengagement occurring in many classrooms. Increasing engagement is seen by both educators and policymakers as the key to addressing problems of low achievement, high levels of student boredom and alienation, and high dropout rates. For many students, dropping out of high school is the last step in a long process during which they become disengaged from school (Rumberger, 2011). Recent U.S. national reports estimate that every school day about 7,000 students decide to drop out of high school, resulting in a total of 1.2 million students dropping out each year (NEAP, 2009). These observations are troubling because youths need to be actively involved in school to acquire the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed in society and to be ready for college and careers. The consequences of disengagement are especially severe for low-income and African American, Hispanic, and Native American students. They are less likely to graduate from high school and face more limited employment prospects, which increases their risk for poverty, poor health, and involvement in the criminal justice system (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2004).

Prior research has shown that engagement is a strong predictor of achievement-related outcomes. When students have higher engagement, they have higher grades, score better on standardized tests, and are more likely to finish high school and go on to college (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). For students to succeed in today's increasingly global and complex economy and become career and college ready, they need to be able to

think critically and solve cognitively complex problems. Students who just go through the motions but are not emotionally and cognitively engaged will not develop the higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills that will be necessary to compete for the jobs of the future.

Unfortunately, there is evidence that students' engagement steadily declines over the course of school. Moreover, prior research shows that many school practices are actually contributing to this decline over time (Fredricks et al., 2004). The decline begins as early as kindergarten and increases significantly over the transitions to middle and high school. It is most severe for boys, African American and Hispanic youths, and children from lower socioeconomic status households. Watching any young child play, it is clear that they are naturally curious and want to learn and explore. However, something happens when children enter school to dampen this natural interest in learning. This book will explore some of the factors that are responsible for this decline in engagement and outline practical, research-based strategies that teachers can use to create more engaging classroom environments where deep learning occurs.

How can student engagement be increased? A growing body of research shows that it is possible to increase engagement in schools by making changes to the social and instructional environment (Fredricks et al., 2004). Engagement is presumed to be malleable and responsive to changes in the environment. In fact, increasing engagement has been the central goal of many school improvement efforts, especially at the secondary level (National Research Council, 2004). Focusing on engagement as an explanatory variable for achievement and school completion offers more insight into intervention and prevention strategies than does focusing on unalterable demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Although teachers cannot change the innate characteristics of their students, they can change the classroom environment. A student's engagement depends on the opportunities a teacher provides for that student to be engaged. It is clear from the intervention literature that teachers do have control and do play a powerful role in creating environments in which deep learning and engagement can take place.

How This Book Is Different Than Other Books on Engagement

Many books have been written on how to increase engagement. Why should you read this book, and how is it different from these other texts? First, the author is one of the leading researchers in the field of engagement and motivation. She was one of the first to write about how engagement needs to be conceptualized as a multidimensional idea that includes behavior, emotion, and cognition. Many other texts simply equate engagement with on-task behavior, which neglects the emotional and cognitive dimensions that are so critical for deeper learning and achievement. Second, other books tend to emphasize classroom management techniques as the primary means for increasing engagement. This book also considers how instructional tasks, teacher-student relations, and peer dynamics help to create a culture of engagement in the classroom. Third, many of these other books present a simplistic list of strategies for increasing engagement in the short term, such as adding a fun activity or a hands-on task. This book acknowledges that there are no quick fixes or silver bullets to achieve full engagement. Rather, continuous efforts in creating a culture of engagement using research-based findings will result in powerful long-term changes to student engagement in every classroom. Finally, this book emphasizes that educators need to understand how student engagement fits within the broader context of a child's day and acknowledge the role that out-of-school time and families play in shaping engagement. Most other books neglect the reality that these factors affect what happens in the classroom.

Organization of the Book

The goal of this book is to expose both prospective and practicing K-12 educators to current advances in research on student engagement and to discuss implications for classroom practice. Readers will learn how to apply strategies that are supported by current research to help them reflect on and create more engaging classroom contexts where deep learning can take place. Examples will be provided for different age groups and content areas, as will ideas that are relevant to all ages and subject domains. In sections entitled *Engagement in*

Practice, three educators who teach in ethnically and economically diverse schools describe the strategies that they or their colleagues have used to increase engagement in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms.

Each chapter will describe an educational misconception and use research-based evidence to burst this myth. Hypothetical student cases are threaded throughout the text to illustrate the causes and consequences of disengagement and ways to improve engagement in the classroom. These cases will remind teachers of students they have either taught or observe daily in their classroom. Extensive opportunities for teachers to self-reflect through *Stop and Reflect* questions and *Text-to-Practice Exercises* are also provided in each chapter. These questions and exercises are designed to help readers connect the concepts to real-life examples and try some new approaches. *Key Terms and Concepts* are provided at the end of each chapter to enhance comprehension. Finally, each chapter includes a list of additional books and Web sites that educators can use to further their knowledge and understanding of student engagement.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter 1

MYTH 1: It's Easy to Tell Who Is Engaged: What Is Engagement and How Can I Assess It in My Classroom?

The first chapter introduces a multidimensional view of engagement that includes behavior, emotion, and cognition. Research evidence is provided to counter the myth that it is easy to tell which students are engaged by just observing their on-task behavior and compliance. Although these behaviors are important components of engagement, the greatest achievement and learning outcomes occur when students rank high on all three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. Educators can make more valid decisions about student engagement by collecting and evaluating data. Therefore, the chapter discusses why it is important and beneficial to assess engagement in the classroom. A variety of methods to assess engagement, including student self-reports, teacher ratings, observational measures, walkthroughs, and collecting data on early warning signs, are presented.

*Chapter 2**MYTH 2: Some Students Just Don't Care: How Disengagement Is More Than Just a Lack of Student Motivation*

One common misconception is that disengagement merely reflects a lack of student motivation. Research on how classroom practices, including the types of tasks assigned, quality of teacher-student relations, and peer dynamics, contribute to disengagement in the classroom is presented to counter this myth. The first section of this chapter outlines how the tasks that students typically do in school often bear little resemblance to how learning happens outside of the classroom, and, as a result, fail to result in deep engagement and learning. Next, the reasons why some teachers develop poor relations with their students and the consequences of these negative interactions for student engagement are outlined. Finally, the roles that peer rejection and negative peer dynamics play in disengagement are discussed.

*Chapter 3**MYTH 3: What Happens Outside of School Competes With Academics: How Out-of-School Time and Families Affect Engagement in School*

Youths spend over 50 percent of their waking hours outside of school. How students and their parents choose to spend this time has important implications for students' engagement in the classroom. In the first section, research on the benefits of participation in organized out-of-school activities such as sports or the arts for academic adjustment are outlined. Next, research on variations in engagement between school and out-of-school organized settings is presented. Possible reasons for the higher rates of engagement in out-of-school settings and the implications of these differences in engagement for classroom practice are discussed. Self-determination theory is presented as one theoretical approach for understanding why out-of-school contexts tend to be more engaging settings than school. In the final section, research on how parents can influence student engagement through the values they endorse and the experiences they provide in the home is presented. Practical strategies for working with families to increase engagement are provided.

Chapter 4

MYTH 4: Hands-On Is Minds-On: How to Create More Engaging Classroom Tasks That Result in Deep Learning

The tasks students complete in the classroom have important implications for motivation and learning. Chapter 4 provides a brief introduction to motivational theory, research on how children learn, and research on authentic instruction as the basis for creating more engaging classroom environments. This chapter addresses the common practice of emphasizing the motivational aspects of instructional tasks over the cognitive dimensions. Although developing fun and interesting tasks is part of the puzzle, deep learning and engagement will not occur unless educators also address the cognitive aspects of tasks that encourage higher-level thinking and reasoning. Authentic instructional models are presented as one pedagogical approach that incorporates the motivational and cognitive dimensions of engaging classrooms. Challenges in implementing this type of instruction in the classroom are presented. Finally, research-based recommendations for addressing both the motivational and cognitive demands of learning tasks are presented.

Chapter 5

MYTH 5: Focus on Content: Don't Make It Personal: How Relationships Matter for Student Engagement

Chapter 5 discusses why developing positive relations in the classroom is important for engagement. One misconception, especially among secondary school teachers, is that teaching content is more important for student success than developing relations with students. Prior research on how teachers' interpersonal and academic support influences students' engagement and learning is presented to counter this myth. Research on the effects of teacher involvement, autonomy support, and classroom structure on student engagement is presented. Challenges inherent in building relationships with difficult students are also discussed. Finally, research-based recommendations for fostering positive relationships with all students are provided.

*Chapter 6**MYTH 6: Socializing With Peers Detracts From Student Engagement: How to Create a Peer Context That Supports Engagement*

Chapter 6 focuses on the role peers play in student engagement. One common misconception is that a quiet classroom means that students are engaged and involved in productive learning. Another myth is that students learn best when working individually on tasks without the distraction of their peers. Research on the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive benefits of friendship in school and on how students collaborate and learn from their peers is presented to counter these myths. In addition, examples of cooperative and collaborative learning models are discussed. Some of the challenges inherent in cooperative group work are presented, along with research-based strategies to address each of these challenges. Finally, strategies for building stronger classroom communities are discussed.

*Chapter 7**MYTH 7: There's Only So Much a Teacher Can Do: How to Help Those Students Still Struggling to Succeed*

Chapter 7 addresses the view held by many teachers that even with changes to the social and instructional environment it is not possible to engage all students. A common assumption is that some students' success or failure is beyond the control of the teacher, especially that of students living in low-income and high-risk settings. Although many students do come to school facing significant challenges that can impact their learning and engagement, evidence from the intervention research shows that individual teachers, whole schools, and communities can make changes to help these disengaged students succeed in the classroom. In this chapter, the individual factors associated with higher levels of disengagement are outlined. Next, we outline strategies for engaging groups that have tended to have higher rates of disengagement, including boys, low achievers, students with a history of behavioral problems, and African American, Hispanic, and low-income youths. Practical, research-based recommendations for teachers to help reengage these students are presented. Finally, successful prevention and intervention programs for disengaged youths are discussed.

Chapter 8

MYTH 8: Student Engagement Is a Student Choice: Choosing to Make the Effort and Not Waiting for Engagement to Happen

The concluding chapter highlights the reasons why it so critical for teachers to address the level of disengagement in their classrooms. As educators, we can make the decision to invest our efforts towards increasing student engagement, or we can invest our efforts at students who are already disengaged. Being proactive rather than reactive has far more positive outcomes. Creating engaging classrooms that involve all students cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally means transforming student learning for the long term. When students experience deep engagement, they become lifelong learners and seek out more engaging learning experiences over time.

A Challenge to Readers

Prior to the overview of the chapters, the argument was made that student engagement can be improved in every classroom for every student—a proposition most teachers would be wary of. However, this book challenges readers to examine any beliefs they hold and/or practices they engage in that may underlie one or all of the myths presented in this book. Changing the ways we think and talk about our students and the reasons we attribute to their engagement or disengagement are the first steps in improving student behavior, supporting positive emotions, and enhancing higher-level thinking.