

Improving Student Engagement While Understanding the Relevance of Social Status and Inequalities with a School Context

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Abstract

Motivation is an essential and integral part in improving student engagement in any given school context. Therefore, this study aims to find out countermeasures to improve student engagement by giving importance to factors such as culture, ethnicity, gender and social perspectives.

Keywords

Socio-Economic Status (SES), Student Engagement, Motivation, Ethnicity, Gender, Culture, Identity-Based Model (IBM)

1. Introduction

Motivation is an essential and integral part in improving student engagement, and is most efficiently defined as an accumulated energy release during a particular aspect concerning one's wellbeing (Abeysekera & Dawson, 2014; Lynch, 2015; Reeve & Lee, 2014; Yilmaz, 2017; Zajda, 2018). Moreover, lack of motivation is a leading concern of the modern educational era as 40 percent of high-school students are found to be disengaged with any given learning material at any given school, and this may be considering various factors such as student socioeconomic status (SES), race, ethnicity, gender and readiness for digital learning (Cheung, Cheung, & Hue, 2016; Jang, Kim, & Reeve, 2012; Kingsley, Townsend, Henderson-Wilson, & Bolam, 2013; Masters & Adams, 2018; McConney & Perry, 2010; Starmans, Sheskin, & Bloom, 2017; Wheelahan, 2009).

Masters & Adams (2018) state that equity within education means fairness as mentioned in the Australian Council of Educational Research (ACER) database.

This could significantly indicate peoples' preference in accommodating fairness than equivalence as some situations require achieving higher academic success by a larger number of students who understand the criteria in meeting the standards to pass the unit of study.

Therefore, teachers must partake in self-reflective practices that help them to facilitate a positive learning environment for all students that allow them to have equal opportunities catering fairness and evaluate student psychological needs by giving importance to their thoughts, ideas and stories (Donnelly, 2014; Francis et al., 2019; Juma, Lehtomäki, & Naukkarinen, 2017; Peters, 2019; Thompson, 2020).

Hence, the need to focus on countermeasures that could improve student engagement is eminent. This review will examine the importance of improving student engagement based on the understanding of relevant social theories of social status and inequalities within a school context by analysing the integral nature of students' culture (traditions), gender, ethnicity and social perspectives, that not only enhances self-congruence and self-identity with one's cultural and ethnic background but motivates students to re-learn and understand the topic content to a greater depth. Teachers are also responsible for maintaining a culturally responsive classroom as this could help determine and cater to the needs of students.

2. Social Theories and Inequality within the School Context

The functionalist theory classifies educational systems as the major means of transmitting knowledge and the values of every society. Cheung et al. (2016) believe that contribution to student belongingness or social integration is a supposed function of education and that the structural part of society is to fulfil the integrative function and that it consists of the reproductive system which shapes through its future citizens. This is where serious problems emerge as the unequal quantum of income or wealth can be accounted as recourse to any explanation. Such an explanation relies heavily on a researchers' arbitrary judgement to slice the stratification model at various interval points, allowing some individuals to move up or down the strata but the shape itself tends to remain unchanged and that the model cannot explain why anyone would move up or down the model or why anyone would hold a particular place within a society.

However, an interesting factor to analyse is the repercussions of student diversity within a school environment concerning the religious, racial and ethnic background of students (Moore-Berg & Karpinski, 2019; Papaikononou, 2017). In contrast, a problem in considering the diversity of people may categorise some individuals on the top of the pyramid because they are smarter than everyone due to their education or genetic and racial superiority. Such an implicit moral makes some individuals (most often the ones at the top) more deserving than others, and in education, this is considered as a "deficit model" because it

deems some students as successful while others lack the intelligence, cultural capital, work ethic or providence (Chernoff, 2013; Croizet, Autin, Goudeau, Marot, & Millet, 2019; Pearce, Down, & Moore, 2008).

Peters (2019) cited a quote by Kevin Harris, a renowned academic and Australian teacher who said: “education is an instrument of the state” and when scoping through a functional theorist’s perspective, its role is to stabilise the social order but how this stability is maintained or reproduced is not immediately obvious. Such a conflict within fundamental part of the social order gives rise to conflict theory in positing schools as a critical site in reproducing social inequalities, particularly social class conflict and racial stratification (Marks, 2016; Perry, 2017, 2018; Sharma, 2015).

Chernoff (2013) argue schools are not meritocratic, where individuals’ hard work and talent do not necessarily guarantee success. The author explains further that larger social forces produce unequal outcomes that favour the affluent, and inequality within and among schools to help reproduce the status quo. Marx, Webber and Durkheim address the relationship between education and social conflict as maintaining existing power structures while creating a docile workforce or underclass.

Such a combination can be classified as diversion and inculcation. Diversion means to direct students’ and teachers’ energies towards activities peripheral to their common interests and unthreatening to the state and employers, while inculcation refers to the fostering of particular skills and attitudes needed by the employers, including the state in general at any given time (McQueen, 2009; Sriprakash & Proctor, 2013).

Sriprakash & Proctor (2013) iterate upper-class parents are better able to send their children not only to exclusive private schools but also to public state-funded schools. Such schools are likely to be of higher-quality in affluent areas than in impoverished places since these are funded by property taxes within the school districts. It is more likely that wealthy areas provide more property taxes as revenue, which leads to higher-quality schools.

Perry (2018) mention that educational inequality has many forms and is a major concern because of its drastic impact on young people. Wheelahan (2009) agree with Perry (2018) in that students of low SES are over-represented initially and then under-represented during the later stages as second-class citizens. However, McConney & Perry (2010) argue by using the internationally approved student-assessment dataset for Australia to illustrate that there is no distinct co-relation with student performance and student SES. They also suggest that with proper implementation of policies and strategies can mitigate an influence within school SES to help students achieve higher academic success. Furthermore, Donnelly (2014), Francis et al. (2019) and Thompson (2020) identify the quality of the teacher as the determining factor in enriching a school environment by fostering a positive learning environment for all students to enhance their engagement.

3. Analysis

A study conducted by [Jang et al. \(2012\)](#) showed that teachers are contributing heavily towards classroom motivation and functioning by caring for students' wellbeing promotes mutual respect among students. The author and associates also mention that by implementing such relationship qualities can further help teachers to incorporate projected instructional emphases such as mastery-oriented classroom goal structure, formative and informal grading practices, and also the inclusion of tactful strategies that captivates student interests ([Patall et al., 2019](#); [Urdan & Schoenfelder, 2006](#)).

[Patall et al. \(2019\)](#) exclaim that when teachers rely heavily on controlling style tend to neglect or thwart students' motivation and classroom functioning. [Jang et al. \(2012\)](#) further examined this cause and observed that when teachers use motivational strategies, it provides autonomy support in nurturing student psychological need satisfaction. Self-determination theory later supports the promotion of psychological satisfaction, which is observed to enhance classroom engagement and also helps in achieving learning and performance goals ([Elmore & Oyserman, 2012](#); [Fisher, O'Donnell & Oyserman, 2017](#); [Horowitz, Sorensen, Yoder, & Oyserman, 2018](#); [McLeod, 2018](#); [Oyserman, 2008](#); [Oyserman, Johnson, & James, 2011](#); [Reeve & Lee, 2014](#); [Vecchione, Alessandri, & Marsicano, 2014](#)).

In contrast, [Reeve & Lee \(2014\)](#) counter-argue that cross-sectional research concerning the self-determination theory may not function to its optimum level due to temporal causality within the directional effect on variables in a model, might affect another. Subsequently, this method is observed to manipulate autonomy by predicting students' psychological need satisfaction, engagement, learning and achievement.

Furthermore, a cohort study by [Elmore & Oyserman \(2012\)](#) illustrated the importance of the role of gender within a classroom. They showcased in the study that girls generally outperform boys based on identity-based model (IBM). IBM is a categorical segment within the self-determination theory, and it expresses vast potentiality of peoples' preference to act in line with important social identity such as gender ([Vecchione et al., 2014](#)). In cases of behaviour that is succinct to identity-congruence depends on the motives underlying one's identity commitments, indicating pressure versus volition, and goals define one's identity, which acts as nexus between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation ([Bart & Maarten, 2011](#); [Pantziara & Philippou, 2013](#)). Hence the need to understanding identity-congruence with self is crucial in determining or adjusting one's well-being. Moreover, IBM indicates the nature of boys and girls to scan the classroom for acquiring clues in terms of the process that helps them transition into becoming a male or female, which also allows them to achieve higher academic and occupational success.

A study in co-relation to [Elmore & Oyserman \(2012\)](#) conducted by [Pantziara & Philippou \(2013\)](#) identifies the need for understanding the racial-ethnic identities of students as a crucial factor in examining conflicts within non-integra-

tional images. Through this multidimensional complexity concerning the group, differences are essential in monitoring academic success, and comparison of group dimension with societal engagement is crucial for schools to raise the standards of student engagement to decrease the rate of observed conceptive depression among students of grades 8 and 9. Pantziara & Philippou (2013) clearly show that when teachers associate with students by identifying their racial-ethnic identities tend to work harder on a given task or assessment. Over time the research study showed results regarding the connectedness, awareness of racism and embedded achievement to produce a more stable data concerning the enhanced student engagement and improving their academic success.

Whether racial-ethnic identity was induced to be more notable with an experimental manipulation or assessment of longitudinal study, to consider identity as an important tool for identity-congruent with self is unclear. However, it did produce better-engaged learning and performance-based achievement as modelled within IBM theory. Hence, the need for teachers to foster culturally responsive classroom is vital as this allows teachers to demonstrate to students that they genuinely care about students' cultural, emotional and intellectual needs (Huebner, 2010; Lynch, 2015).

4. Strategies to Foster a Culturally Responsive Classroom

Several strategies can be used to build trusting relationships with diverse students, however, Lynch (2015) identifies six-strategies that can be used to foster a culturally responsive classroom. Firstly, encouraging students to research and share their ethnic background can be used as a mean to develop trusting relationships, not only with students but also to generate mutual respects amongst themselves. Analysing and celebrating the differences in traditions, beliefs and social behaviours can help students to be motivated and associate their identity-congruence with self in constituting a culture which is essential in building a strong culturally responsive classroom (Burnette, 2019; Lewthwaite et al., 2015; Lloyd, Lewthwaite, Osborne, & Boon, 2015; Moore-Berg & Karpinski, 2019; Schleicher, 2017; Wilson, 2018).

Secondly, being facilitator instead of instructor helps nurture for student well-being. Students in an authoritarian classroom tend to portray negative behaviours as a result of a perceived sense of social injustice. Teachers providing questionnaires to students in seeking their interests can further enhance their intrinsic motivation and connectedness to the given learning material (Akin & Radford, 2018; Lynch, 2015; Thompson, 2020; Zajda, 2018). Provided, if students are allowed to bring their reading materials and then present it with class allows them to interact and share stories, thoughts and ideas, which are essential to developing their cultural and social perspective (Quist, 2019).

Thirdly, maintaining a strict level of language concerns such as acknowledging the diversity of the language and how it is celebrated within the context of the learning materials can promote cultural diversity within the classroom. When

providing accompanying learning materials in students' primary language can further help non-native English-speaking students to feel confident and also in developing their fluency and literacy skills in a given topic as prescribed by the Victorian or Australian curriculum (Ai, Kostogriz, Wen, & Wang, 2018; Lynch, 2015; Maxwell, Lowe, & Salter, 2018).

Fourthly, maintaining high expectation for students encourages them to work harder and achieve greater success in their academic performance (Akin & Radford, 2018; McConney & Perry, 2010). Given that culturally responsive instruction is student-centred philosophy, it should come as no surprise that expectation for achievement is determined and assigned to students on an individual basis. Praising students work in proportion to their accomplishment helps them display a positive attitude in completing the set task or assessment (Ai et al., 2018; Colquhoun & Dockery, 2012; Kleeman, 2012; Lynch, 2015).

Fifthly, the incorporation of self-testing methods can help students to become active learners. While testing can usually refer to graded assessments in a traditional classroom, in culturally responsive classroom frequent non-graded tests can provide adequate progress checks and ensure that students do not fall behind on required learning materials (Benyohai, 2019; Jong, 2017; Lynch, 2015). Helping students to self-test will enable them to remember what they have learned and in doing so will act as a prompt in re-learning the content or study to greater depth on their own.

Finally, maintaining an inclusive curriculum enables students to feel included within all aspects of school and it helps teachers to identify and acknowledge the unique differences of each student (Lovett, 2016; Lynch, 2015). A culturally responsive curriculum also assists teachers in gathering information concerning students' non-school cultural life and thus provide means to incorporate better inclusive strategies as they partake in self-reflective practices (Lewthwaite et al., 2015).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, theories outweigh practicality, when matters are disclosed concerning student satisfaction and readiness, which matches to the core ability of students' identity congruence with self to see positive outcomes concerning students' learning, achievement and performance within a classroom setting. On a personal reflection scale, the mode of preference would be to ideally incorporate more motivational and functioning style that showcased to promote improvement in students' engagement while dealing with a model of instruction. It also showed to significantly improve students' learning and performance.

This is unclear based on the studies conducted which regarded experimental manipulation or longitudinal study designs that multiplied the outcomes and produced significant results in achieving optimum motivation and functioning in a classroom. As a budding teacher, the most appropriate standard to utilise would be an incorporation of a holistic approach in driving motivational strate-

gies that cater more relationship qualities such as caring to generate awareness towards mutual respect among classmates and teachers. This generates connectedness and self-determination as outlined in the theory of identity-based motivation.

The broader perspective to adapt would be to try and help students to identify their vast potentiality within their identity that enables to have better congruence within themselves and others to produce a much-valued self-efficacy and achievements that drives psychological need satisfaction in attaining the desired academic success.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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