TOOLS *of* ENGAGEMENT

SHARING EVIDENCE OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT
SPARKS CHANGES IN TEACHER PRACTICE

ANN MINNETT, MIKE MURPHY, SANDY NOBLES, AND TRINA TAYLOR

When visitors tour our classrooms at the J. Erik Jonsson Community School, a 3-year-old through 5th-grade laboratory school just south of downtown Dallas, Texas, they sense that something is different. Visitors remark about the respectful, caring environment of the school and the high-powered instruction, and they want to learn how they can implement these qualities in their own schools.

As part of the research, professional learning, and leadership team at the Jonsson School, we regularly share the work of the Jonsson School with other educators and communicate Jonsson's sim-

ple success formula: Powerful pedagogy + trusting relationships = student engagement for learning

In fall 2006, we grew curious about what the teachers were actually doing in the classroom to elicit this powerful student engagement. We hypothesized that if we could develop a way to collect evidence about student engagement in classrooms and share that evidence with our teachers, they would begin to transform their practices based on what they were learning about their students. Our supposition was supported by NSDC's Standards for Staff Development Data-Driven standard, which reminds us that "the study of such [classroom] evidence is itself a potent means of staff development (NSDC, 2001).

We asked many questions, including: How do Jonsson teachers establish learning relationships with students? What exactly do our teachers do in the classroom to engage their students in learning? How engaged are our students as a result of teachers' actions? Is Jonsson student engagement really related to what they learn? Our questions, the classroom research during the school year 2006-07, and the data and dialogue with participating teachers created a startling exchange of evidence and resulted in changes in teacher practices.

THE DESIGN OF OUR ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH

Our team first needed a tool to use to collect evidence of teacher behaviors and resulting student engagement actions. We culled through research about student learning and engagement and our findings about classroom relationships to study

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Actions that we observed

BY THE TEACHER
- Call on individual student
- Latency
- Help
- Delve
- Higher-order question
- Affirm
- Praise
- Reason for praise
- Listen
- Acknowledge feelings
- Proximity (teacher-initiated)
- Courtesy
- Show personal interest
- Touch
- Desist/redirect

BY THE STUDENT
- Raise hand
- Ask (teacher) a question
- Answer teacher's question
- Follow directions
- Proximity (student-initiated)
- Active listening (look at)
- Off-task with peer
- Off-task alone
- Disrupt other student

how teachers engage their students in learning. We developed the engagement visit tool (see p. 27) and adopted the teacher actions variables from the Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement program, a set of classroom behaviors found to reduce student achievement disparities (Gottfredson, Marciniak, Birdseye, & Gottfredson, 1995). We intentionally selected from only the positive variables. We were interested in develop-

ing a tool that captured what teachers did to engage their students, to establish and maintain a learning relationship.

Another reason for the focus on the positive in classrooms is that we wanted to engage teachers in the reflective process. After we visited classrooms using this tool, we intended to talk with participating teachers and share the relationship of their actions to student engagement. Acknowledging the teacher's strengths and building upon them would, we predicted, strengthen the foundation at our school to regularly share real data about classroom practice. We thought that when the teacher learned that the focus was on how to better engage the students, the more open to change he or she would become and the more changes he or she would voluntarily implement.

Thus, the engagement visit tool contained 15 positive teacher actions. The nine student behaviors on the engagement visit tool reflected our desire to capture positive student behavior toward the teacher and avoid emphasis on negative intent or misbehavior, although we did include off-task and disruptive categories of behavior. The student variables were taken from our collective experience and research in hundreds of classrooms over 30 years.

Our engagement visit tool contained one more component. The student self-rating of engagement tool was adapted from Schlechty's assessment strategies for engaging students in learning. Schlechty defined five levels of student engagement: authentically engaged; ritually engaged (work-

ANN MINNETT is director of research and evaluation, MIKE MURPHY is director of education and professional learning, and TRINA TAYLOR is research specialist at the Salesmanship Club Youth and Family Centers, the sponsoring organization for the J. Erik Jonsson Community School. SANDY NOBLES is principal at the Jonsson School. You can contact them at aminnett@salesmanshipclub.org, mmurphy@salesmanshipclub.org, ttaylor@salesmanshipclub.org, and snobles@jonssonschool.org.

Engagement visit tool

DATE AND TIME _____

SCHOOL _____

GRADE _____ SUBJECT _____

CLASSROOM TEACHER _____

CLASSROOM ACTIVITY DURING OBSERVATION _____

Student names					Notes
ENGAGING TEACHER ACTIONS AND BEHAVIORS					
Call on student					
Latency 5+					
Help					
Delve					
Higher-level questions and extensions					
Affirmation					
Specific praise					
Listen					
Accept feelings					
Proximity to student (teacher-initiated)					
Seek student ideas, thoughts, opinions					
Courtesy					
Personal interest or connection to student					
Touch					
Desist					
STUDENT ACTIONS AND BEHAVIORS					
Raise hand					
Ask the teacher a question					
Answer teacher's question, respond					
Follow teacher's direction					
Proximity to teacher (student-initiated)					
Active listening to teacher (look at)					
Check in					
Off-task with peer					
Off-task — alone					
Disrupting others					

Teacher addresses whole class (tally): _____

Additional information: _____

_____

Source: Salesmanship Club Institute for Excellence in Urban Education, Dallas, Texas

ing for the grade); passively engaged (to avoid negative consequences); actively retreating; and openly rebellious (Schlechty, 2002). We asked students to become involved with our research. We defined these levels in a separate tool so our students could understand the differences and rate themselves on their engagement. (Our research found that children as young as 1st graders were able to indicate their level of engagement on the quick survey and that they did so with greater discrimination than did their teachers or other adult observers.)

Armed with our tools, we were ready to begin our classroom research. The Jonsson Community School is unique in that it employs a classroom researcher who works with the school's sponsoring agency in evaluating the agency's programs. This person would conduct the classroom research, and since she had no evaluative responsibilities over the teachers, the context seemed right for side-by-side research and dialogue. Eight Jonsson teachers volunteered for the research project over the course of the school year.

THE INVITATION

We shared all materials and procedures with the participating teachers before observing in the classroom, and they understood that they would receive copies of their data and that we expected them to use the information for reflection about their practices. The classroom researcher visited each classroom prior to formal observations to help teachers and students feel more comfortable with her in the classroom. Student buy-in was also important. The classroom researcher arranged with the teacher

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J. Erik Jonsson Community School

Dallas, Texas

Grades: Pre-K-5
Enrollment: 232
Staff: 23
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	3%
Black:	2%
Hispanic:	94%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	0%
Native American:	0%
Other:	1%

Limited English proficient: 64%
Languages spoken: English and Spanish
Free/reduced lunch: 77%
Contact: Mike Murphy, director of education and professional learning, Salesmanship Club Youth and Family Centers
E-mail: mmurphy@salesmanshipclub.org

to have five to 10 minutes of class time to discuss project details with the class, and she enlisted the teacher to join her in presenting the project to students.

WHAT WE FOUND

Over the school year, our classroom researcher observed all students and teachers in the eight 1st- through 5th-grade classes, five times for each student in each class. Since the relationship between the teacher actions and student behaviors was at the core of our research questions, our researcher deliberately selected four random students per session to target for observation and documented their behaviors with the teacher and classmates for 15 minutes each time, regardless of what they were doing. This practice ensured that the researcher wouldn't focus on students who were acting out or displaying disruptive behavior in the classroom.

THE EVIDENCE

Our multiple classroom observations, tallies from the engagement tools, and subsequent exchanges with

participating teachers revealed the following evidence:

- Students as young as 1st grade were able to identify their levels of interest in classroom activities, and all Jonsson students were engaged about 90% of the time.
- All positive student behaviors were related to teachers calling on them and calling them by name in a conversational manner and in close proximity.
- Students' positive behaviors were highly correlated with the teacher's affirmation and listening to their students.
- Teachers engaged students at close range — teacher-initiated proximity to a student was correlated with the student's active listening, asking and answering questions, and positive self-ratings of engagement.
- Teachers successfully managed and minimized students' off-task behavior at close range, with light touch, using the student's name, and with redirection.
- Both teachers and students were regularly more active and more engaged in their work during morning hours than in the afternoon.

THE EXCHANGE

These data are interesting, but the process of feedback and teacher reflection was the most important component of our research. All of the teachers were eager to learn what the classroom researcher had seen in their classrooms. To facilitate this, the researcher shared copies of the tallied tools with each teacher. Each tool showing teacher actions and student behaviors painted a picture of interactions and behaviors during that particular observation segment and provided the foundation for each exchange between researcher and teacher.

We learned so much from the teachers about how to exchange this

evidence. Teachers needed to receive the information when they were free from teaching responsibilities and could reflect on what it meant. We also felt that the immediacy of the feedback was crucial. Teachers were provided the evidence of student engagement in a face-to-face meeting later in the same observation day, or at the very least, at the end of each week of classroom observations.

To assist in using the tools for reflection, we set up discussion mechanisms. A discussion board on the school's intranet site was valuable in addition to a question-and-answer box in the teacher workroom for anonymous suggestions. By far, the face-to-face exchange was the most important part of the learning. The classroom researcher learned that teachers needed time to mull over the tallied tools, noting patterns of marks for student behaviors and their own behaviors toward students. The researcher was not in a hurry to force conclusions. She found that by asking teachers to reflect on what they saw in the tools, teachers would naturally respond to the data, ask questions, and wonder what would happen if they changed their behaviors. The classroom researcher used a menu of questions to delve into the teachers' reflections:

- What was going on during this time?
- How, if at all, do you behave differently toward students of varying ethnicity?
- Is there more behavior toward one gender?
- Is there more interaction with high-achieving students than others?
- How does time of day relate to your teacher-student interactions?
- How does your student grouping (individual seatwork, small groups, whole class) affect your behavior toward students?
- Are students of all ethnic groups equally engaged in classroom activities?
- How do the students' self-ratings of engagement relate to their behavior toward you?
- What's happening in the classroom when students go off-task?
- Given this information, what would you want to do to more consistently engage your students?

POSITIVE CHANGES

The participating teachers flooded our leadership team and the classroom researcher with ideas and additional questions after reflecting on the data. These reflections formed the ground-

work for concrete changes in practice to enhance student engagement in classrooms. Over time, we found that participating teachers began to adjust their actions to gain more student engagement, a trend reinforced by subsequent observations of these teachers. Indeed, the most rewarding part of our work came toward the end of the school year, when we worked with four Jonsson teachers who wanted more specific information about what had happened in their classrooms. Here are two brief stories that describe how two teachers used the research to further their own learning.

Rachel, a 3rd-grade teacher, was challenged by two students' behaviors in her class. They made good grades, but our observations noted that they were often off-task and that Rachel rarely acknowledged them or redirected their behavior. When Rachel reviewed the coding sheets from her room, she was genuinely surprised by those students' actions, and she noticed that both students were distracting other students. When the researcher returned in a month to observe again, she found that not only was the teacher more responsive to both students in all aspects of their behavior, but the students rated themselves as more engaged in the classroom activities, and their behavior was more controlled.

Another teacher, Ted, was not convinced that student engagement was really connected to student learning, which was one of our original questions. Ted thought that his 2nd graders' ratings of their own levels of engagement were inaccurate and were not related to their learning, so the classroom researcher collaborated with him to investigate his question. Ted conducted four geography lessons, and our team collected the students' ratings of their engagement in each lesson. Immediately following the lesson, each student answered three questions about content, and our team correlated the levels of engagement with the students' scores. Sure enough, those who were more engaged made better grades on the quizzes. And now Ted believes not only the data about frequencies of actions, but that students' self-ratings have merit.

We now call our system of engagement tools and facilitated feedback the Engagement Exchange, reflecting the critical role the exchange of the evidence plays in teacher practice transformation. During the 2007-08 school year, we have continued to use our student engagement tools in classrooms at the Jonsson Community School and in three other schools in the Dallas area. We have gained important information as to how our teachers engage students. More importantly, we have discovered a powerful device to encourage teachers to recognize and own their student engagement practices. A simple tool used to collect data about the relationship between teacher actions and student behaviors coupled with facilitated feedback and the creation of a feedback stream have encouraged teachers to continue to wonder about their own practice and nurtured evidence-based changes for students.

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