

BYRAM HILLS CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT
ARMONK, NEW YORK

GROWTH PLAN END-OF-YEAR REPORT

Title: Engaging the Reluctant Student in the Physical Education Classroom

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School/Grade: H. C. Crittenden Middle School, Grades 6-8

SUMMARY OF ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Context

I am a physical education teacher of middle school students. Our program offers our students numerous opportunities to increase students' knowledge and skills in the areas of fitness, personal and social responsibility, and a variety of athletic skills and lifetime activities. Most of our students are eager to participate, willing to take risks, seek to improve themselves and are willing to help others based on their previous experiences in our program. However, now and then, there is a student who is "on the sidelines." She is there but not taking risks to participate physically or not engaged socially in the class. My attempt with this research project was to learn why she could or would not participate fully and what I could do as a teacher to make her feel more comfortable so she could take safe risks and participate more fully.

Action Plan

Responsive action questions:

- I. What is student engagement?
 - a. How do I assist all of my reluctant students to be successfully engaged in learning in my classroom?

Defining my research question was a process that began when I started to learn about student risk taking. As I explored the research and spoke with colleagues, I redefined my question to be about student engagement. I then spent time learning how others defined the topic of student engagement, what the research found in relation to student engagement, and how I could apply this knowledge. I was concerned in particular about an eighth grade student, Devon, who became my case study for this research project.

Resources I used included:

- http://kidshealth.org/teen/school_jobs/school/test_anxiety.html
- *Assessing Student Engagement Rates*, Elaine Chapman.
- *Habits of Mind*, Arthur Costa & Bena Kallick.
- *School Engagement & Students at Risk*, Jeremy Finn.
- *Strengthening Student Engagement*, Dr. Richard D. Jones.

- *Student Engagement and Achievement in American Secondary Schools*, Fred Newman.
- *26 Keys to Student Engagement*, Angela Maiers.

Defining *student engagement* is an ongoing process. Various definitions depend on the age of the subject (effort vs. skill), the age of the study (time on task), what standards engagement is used to measure against (ex. standardized tests), physical skills versus academic skills, episodic engagement (interplay between personal life and academic effort), and the concentration of engagement (what they cannot do versus can do.)

In addition, several researchers have found that the *school culture* and *authentic instruction* directly impact a student's sense of membership and engagement. For example, school climate includes: climate of the school, the quality of teachers, effective discipline, opportunities for extra curricula, and athletics. Authentic instruction might include: student perspectives, working and communicating with others, goal setting, and self governing.

I began a log to observe and document one student, Devon. Devon was a student who would participate but then would suddenly shut down and not participate. I wanted to know why this was happening and what I could do to help her. I observed her both in and out of my classroom and recorded those observations. As time allowed, I interviewed Devon and her teachers, two guidance counselors, her coach and the school nurse.

I learned that Devon had some performance anxiety issues that directly affected how she could or could not perform in class. Often she would ask to be evaluated separately, away from the class without an audience.

After researching several studies on engagement and risk taking I decided to create a survey with questions designed to include the Cognitive, Emotional and Behavioral domains. (See Appendix A.) I included questions about school climate, their feelings about themselves, families and friends, inside and outside of school activities, and levels of comfort or stress certain activities may cause a participant. I consulted my colleagues in my department in designing the specific questions concerning physical education. One hundred-four eighth grade students completed the survey. (See Appendix B.) I then used these results as a base to compare responses of my non-engaged student to those students who were usually very engaged in class. The survey results supported other previous study results but also made me realize that some of the reasons this particular student did not participate readily in my class were due to reasons outside of my class. One question that came to surface was, "How can I help change some of the things she is or is not doing *outside* of my class to improve her engagement *in* my class?"

Some of the research (Dr. Richard Jones, *Strengthening Student Engagement*) found that all three domains, Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral had to be addressed before students would strengthen their engagement. He found that developing a one-on-one student-teacher relationship was a critical first step. I spent a great deal of time with Devon outside of the classroom just getting to know her more, allowing her to relax and open up. I began to keep a journal on our exchanges. In the beginning I recorded as much information I could about the child so I could figure out what was

preventing her from participating fully. As I got to know her better my log entries shifted slightly to what my actions were in response to her actions or inactions.

Dr. Richard Jones felt that teachers should be responsible for engaging the students and that we should promote a school-wide culture of engagement involving students in all school activities. I made an effort to include Devon in whatever activity the school was sponsoring so she felt she belonged both in the classroom and outside of the class.

Data I collected included:

1. Weekly Log on about Devon
2. Survey of 104 eighth grade students on student engagement
3. Interviews and meetings with guidance counselors, coach, school nurse, teachers
4. Daily records of student absenteeism, (un)preparedness, participation levels
5. Student checklists* daily (April and May)
6. Teacher observations in class and locker room

My meetings with the school staff were quite revealing. Devon would have real physical symptoms if she had to perform.

*Checklist.

After researching performance anxiety I decided to create a check list for my students. I gave the checklist to five very specific students for almost every class for six weeks. The behaviors were very specific and I had the students use their same assigned number from the student survey to track their responses. Devon immediately was concerned that she had to complete something, but I reassured her it was for my research project and I just needed to get data about different students in my class. Since they filled in their number and not their name she was more relaxed thinking the responses were anonymous.

In the beginning Devon was quite concerned she did not have all *true* answers on the check list, but as the weeks went on she began to feel more comfortable displaying the behaviors on the checklist. Their responses served as a springboard for her (and others) to discuss what they did in class. One of the items was "*I assisted one of my classmates in class today.*" Whether the answer was true or false we could quickly review who was (or was not) helped, why and how. The day in May when Devon came beaming into my office to say she helped another classmate [complete a task] was a very special moment for both of us!

In the past, if I had a student not participating in PE class, particularly due to unpreparedness, I would give them a sheet to complete that asked questions about the lesson that was taught that day, what was learned, what they observed and so forth. As I researched performance anxiety and engagement I realized that although there was quite a bit of merit to this type of assignment, the emphasis was on other students' behaviors and there was little engagement by the student doing the writing assignment. This quick check list listed very specific behaviors that covered the areas of personal responsibility, social responsibility, knowledge and skills. Students knew what to expect,

discussed the expectations with other students in class and really tried to do all seven items each class. Even students not part of my study group knew about it and were curious to see if they completed all seven items.

I have used this check list with a couple of my seventh grade students and it had a very positive effect on their behaviors. They have even requested to fill out a sheet when they knew they had made an effort to improve their behaviors.

Results

What I learned about my practice:

In the beginning I struggled with being a responsive researcher instead of an action-oriented researcher. I was prepared to have two groups, (one as a control) apply a strategy and see if it was effective. It was difficult for me to realize in order to be a responsive researcher I needed to not only observe and record my student's actions or inactions but I also needed to measure my own responses to this student's involvement and performance.

I learned that there is so much about a student that we may not know. In this case what appeared to be a student "on the sidelines" in my class was a child who had performance anxiety issues in many situations. Had I not spent many meetings with the school nurse, guidance counselors, teachers and coaches I would not have learned how much this affected this child's learning and assessments of learning.

I increased my conversation time with Devon both in the classroom, at lunchtime and after school. Spending time getting to know a student can build trust and strengthen a relationship so she is willing to take risks. First for the teacher, eventually for herself.

The survey results demonstrated to me the correlation between being involved in many activities both in and outside of school and a child being engaged in learning in school. I have made a real effort to learn about what students do outside of my classroom and recognize those efforts and try to connect that with what we are learning in my classroom. I was surprised to learn that Devon felt quite comfortable performing in PE class both alone and with her peers. However, she responded to being very anxious about doing any presentations in front of a class alone or with a peer. As our relationship strengthened we discussed what she could do to overcome that fear so she could show what she knew. Sometimes in my class I would have her do an assessment outside of class, but then share the results (if successful) with her class. We also discussed how she could overcome her fears in other classes.

The checklist I created (the pink slip as the students referred to it) initially created anxiety for Devon. She was physically concerned. I reassured her it was just for my study but I asked her to complete it as she was in my select focus group. As a result she is able to assess herself daily without any fanfare. This is a huge step for her.

I also have used the VIP/LEO Club activities that I co-sponsor to reach out to other students to get them involved in school/ or community activities. This year I extended our invitation to get more students involved. We had four eighth graders sign up for our club in the latter part of the year which is a first!

I found that student engagement is a fascinating topic that is defined differently by many researchers. If students are engaged in activities both in and outside of school and the teachers give recognition to these activities in the classrooms and the school

recognizes them, they are more engaged in school. So I have made an effort to learn what else is going on in a student's life and acknowledge it in my class. I have used my VIP club to recruit others to join in on the activities even if they cannot commit to joining the club so they have a sense of membership.

What I learned about my students:

I learned that there is quite a bit of information about our students that we do not know—what they do in other classes, before and after school, outside of school. All has a bearing on how they feel about school and the quality of their participation in school.

The survey revealed to me that this student had great trepidation about giving a speech, making a presentation alone or with others in front of a class. She revealed that she usually felt tense and nervous answering questions in class. This is information all teachers would find valuable about a student at the beginning of the year to help her feel successful.

My log entries allowed me to go back and look at Devon over the year. Although she has better success in my class—participating more readily, coming prepared on time, not shutting down if she thinks there is an assessment, working through some of her concerns —she did not have the same success academically. She concentrated on her social concerns which have improved from last year but did not perform well in her other academic classes. She revealed to me she knows she did not do as well as she would have liked but seems to be looking ahead. She is having a better fourth quarter and it would be helpful if her high school teachers are informed about her situation to help her overcome some of her issues next year. I will work with the high school staff to make sure she is in an appropriate mentor group.

Implications

1. I would like to do another survey with next year's eighth grade and perhaps seventh grade to learn about students' activities and concerns.
2. I have used my checklist (pink slip) for some of my seventh grade students who are periodically "on the sideline." It had an immediate effect. For example, the next class they were eager to show me they had brought in their clothes and had helped a classmate.
3. I would like to know more about the other students who did not feel comfortable performing in front of others and if there was a skill set we could incorporate into our classes to assist these students.
4. Perhaps we could do more to encourage students to participate in our many clubs and sports and fine arts programs to assist in student engagement school wide.