

# THE STRATEGIES OF VETERAN TEACHERS FOR ENGAGING STUDENTS IN LEARNING ACTIVITIES IN CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

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**Abstract-** Student participation in learning activities refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that the students show when learning or studying, and to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education. Teachers can use a variety of strategies to support the positive emotions that will make the learning process easier for students, lessen negative behavior, and promote student engagement. The aim of this study is to determine and evaluate the views and suggestions of veteran teachers serving in Primary Schools and Secondary Schools in the city of Erzincan over the student engagement in learning activities in school environment. We asked two open ended questions to the participant teachers to obtain the data: “What promotes students engagement in learning activities?”, and “What do you recommend novice teachers to do to promote student engagement?” We used a qualitative research method to evaluate and compare the views of veteran teachers in terms of students’ engagement in learning activities in school environment. The research was carried out with the participation of eight veteran teachers working in various Primary Schools and Secondary Schools in the city of Erzincan for at least 10 years. The views of veteran teachers obtained through face-to-face interviews suggest that entertaining learning environment, drama, music, sport and after-school activities, positive teacher-student relationship, motivation, teacher’s warm and sincere approach to the student, and effective communication with the students and their parents are of great importance and effect on student engagement in learning activities.

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**Key words-** Student Engagement, Positive teacher-student relationship, Veteran Teacher, Classroom Management, Academic Achievement

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Students’ participation and engagement in learning activities in classroom environment and giving full attention to the topic and their teacher during the course is one of the most necessary elements for the course to be effective and productive. For this reason, teachers often use a variety of strategies to support the positive climate in the classroom, which will make the learning process easier for students, lessen negative behavior, and promote student engagement.

### *1.1. Student Engagement*

Student engagement is defined by Shernoff ( 2013 ) as “the heightened simultaneous experience of concentration, interest, and enjoyment in the task at hand”. Engagement is highest in the period when students are at the elementary level (Mahatmya et al. 2012 ),dropping in the transition period from elementary to middle school.

Student engagement has three distinct dimensions; behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement and emotional engagement (Appleton et al., 2008; Fredricks et al., 2004; Blumenfeld et al., 2005). Behaviorally engaged students are characterized as being attentive in class, responsive to rules and instructions, and initiate action (Finn, 1989; Luo et al., 2009). While behavioral engagement reflects a student’s attendance and participation with an activity, cognitive engagement captures the child’s knowledge and beliefs about the activity and self (Appleton et al., 2008; Ripke et al., 2006; Rose-Krasnor, 2009; Simpkins et al., 2006 ). A student’s

emotional engagement is represented by the extent to which he or she feels a sense of belonging to his/her school, values learning and shows excitement toward classroom and afterschool activities (Finn, 1989; Luo et al., 2009; Rose-Krasnor, 2009)

### *1.2 Veteran teachers and their significant characteristics*

Teachers provide support in many ways, such as educating people, teaching and guiding them, giving direction and preparing for life. Students spend most of their time in school with their teachers. Whatever subjects they are transferring to their students, the teachers should reveal interesting, surprising and less well-known aspects of the subject. By asking questions, they should be able to stimulate the curiosity of the student and the need for thinking. Such practices further enhance the high-level thinking skills, engagement rate and academic achievements of the students. Veteran teachers play more important role than novice teachers do in developing necessary skills for student engagement and their academic achievement. The characteristics of veteran teachers include acting without prejudice to their students, paying careful attention to their movements, being kind, compassionate, patient, respectful, soft-tempered, honest, open, reliable, tolerant, considerate, self-confident and devoted themselves to their profession. They tend to be contemporary, social, good listener, dynamic, idealist, sincere and cordial. They are calm and cool in challenging situations. They have effective communication skills, very good general culture, the ability to persuade people and the

skill of dialogue with the students, and internal discipline. These characteristics make teachers profoundly efficient in their profession. Veteran teachers are good at establishing a healthy relationship between students, which can affect the ongoing social development and academic achievement of students throughout school life. The researches (Kesner, 2000; Cornelius-White, 2007; Riley, 2009; Aultman et al., 2009) also show that students are more active in the classrooms in which the positive teacher-student relationship is established and they are more compatible in the classroom. It is also seen that the motivation of these students is higher than the other students and they are more willing to learn and try to perform better.

Positive teacher-student relationship includes proximity, warmth, attention and support. Veteran teachers tend to approach to their students tenderly in a close and warm relationship. Knowing the student's interest, talent and personality, the teacher uses these channels effectively in his or her communication with him. In attentional relationship, teacher listens to his students and asks them if they need help. In a supporting relationship, the teacher is aware of the emotional, developmental and academic needs of the student and tries to meet them. All these factors are very important for engagement of the students in learning activities.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mahatmya et al. (2012) argues student engagement within specific developmental periods regarding the developmental process, opportunities, and challenges in primary, secondary and high school years. Student engagement is found to be a nuanced developmental outcome, and the differences may be a result of the maturation of biological, cognitive, and socio-emotional developmental tasks and the changing contextual landscape for the students in primary and secondary schools.

According to Bierman et al. (2008), the students who can self-regulate their behaviors influence their engagement in learning activities in school environment. Their internal sense of control also has a significant effect on engagement.

Wehlage et al (1989) and Newmann et al. (1992) argued that both student engagement and disengagement were conceptualized in the 1980s as a way to understand and reduce student boredom, alienation, and dropping out. They stated in their studies that the school setting mediates student involvement and engagement which are important for learning activities in school environment.

Furrer & Skinner (2003) states that affective engagement is usually viewed to be concerned with motivation or academic motivation. It is argued in the study that engagement depends on driving force for a specific set of school-related behaviors and interacts with those behaviors through the academic years.

Ryan (2001) carried out a study of 331 seventh-grade students in one urban school, and found out that negative peer influences can lead a student to disidentify and engage in dysfunctional behavior.

It is argued in the study by Cordova and Lepper (1996) that the cognitive quality of teaching in classroom environment has a positive influence on perceived competence and the perceived value of tasks, thus positively influencing students' emotions and engagement.

Investigating the effect of positive emotions, behaviors, and cognitions on student engagement, Shernoff (2013), and Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia (2012) stated that engagement is multidimensional and involves all of them, and positive emotions support engagement and coping in the school setting, and influence engagement, which in turn impacts learning and achievement.

## III. MATERIALS AND METHOD

### 3.1 Problem Statement and Purpose

We aimed at studying on student engagement in learning activities to determine the similar and different views of veteran teachers teaching in primary schools and secondary schools in the city of Erzincan, and the suggestion of veteran teachers as to what novice teachers should do in their classes. In relevant to the purpose of the study we asked the veteran teachers "What promotes students engagement in learning activities?", and "What do you recommend novice teachers to do to promote student engagement?"

### 3.2. Methods and Research Design

We used a qualitative research method to determine the veteran teachers' views and intention in student engagement in learning activities. The most commonly used data collection methods in qualitative research are interview and observation, so it hardly appears to be possible to work with a large sample group in terms of time and cost. Also, the large sample size will cause difficulties in the analysis of large-scale data obtained through observation and interview. For this reason, in qualitative research it is tried to obtain a holistic picture which will represent all possible diversity, richness, difference and irregularity as far as possible, without concern for generalization. We chose to get the necessary data through face-to-face interviews, as this kind of methodological approach enables researchers to interpret and make judgement about immeasurable data. The study was based on the views of veteran teachers in various schools. For this reason we relied on case study design for the purpose of our enquiry.

### 3.3. Participants

The participants in our study were eight veteran teachers working in some Primary and Secondary Schools in Erzincan City for at least ten years. We preferred to get the data from veteran teachers, as they are experienced and aware of almost all teaching

strategies, student attitudes and behaviors, learning capacities and styles of the students, instructional climate, culture and atmosphere in school and classroom environment. In our study, the youngest participant is male, with eleven years of teaching experience, while the eldest is female, with twenty-five years of teaching experience (Table 1). We obtained the data from 8 Primary and Secondary School teachers who admitted to be involved in the interview for the research. The participants were asked whether they were contented to answer to the questions, and then we did the interview with them and asked the questions face to face.. The names of the teachers are coded with letters and numbers.

**Table 1: Statistical data as to Gender, Age, School and Years of Experience**

GENDER		AGE		SCHOOL		EXPERIEN CE	
Male	4	31-35 years	3	Primary school	4	10 -20 years	6
Femal e	4	36-40 years	3	Seconda ry school	4	21 years and over	2
		Over 40 years	2				
<b>TOTA L</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>TOTA L</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>8</b>

### 3.4. Research Instrument

In the study, the tool with semi structured interview form was used to obtain necessary data from veteran teachers in primary and secondary schools. We asked two open ended questions to the participants. The questions were produced in accordance with the basic characteristics of veteran teachers and student engagement in learning activities. The questions of the interview were formed by the final judgements of three experts at the departments of Educational Sciences and Classroom Teaching in the Faculty of Education, Erzincan University.

### 3.5. Data analysis

The data processed in the study were obtained through one by one and face to face interviews with the participants in Erzincan city. The replies and comments to the interview questions were abstracted and made into pure data. The data were then transferred and digitalized into computer in order to form digital data.

## IV. FINDINGS

The oral-reply expressions and statements given by veteran teachers working in Erzincan city to the questions in the semi-structured interview form were typed and arranged, summarized and extracted into pure data. The final statements are given below.

The questions asked to the teachers are “What promotes students engagement in learning activities?”, and “What do you recommend novice teachers to do to promote student engagement?” The sample reply-statements for the questions are given as followings.

(A.E; Female; Primary School Teacher for 14 years): “...Of course all of us have students who cannot focus on the lesson or take care of everything out of the classroom and look like strangers. Particularly in crowded classrooms, it is probable to encounter such problems in situations that obstruct classroom integrity and course flow. When we ask question to the students, there are always a few students not constantly participating or participating in unconventional answers, active interaction with the paintings they did during the class, dealing with the food under the desk, dropping pencils, looking for something, even as much as possible to carry their head in their bags, sitting out doing nothing... I try to develop my classroom from ordinary one into attractive one by highlighting sound tone, using classroom effectively, laying out classroom in relevant to the topics of the courses, building effective cooperation with the parents, applying promotion games, using motivational words, asking sudden questions and so on.. I suggest the new teachers to do what I have done in the classroom environment to make unattended students to engage in the classes...”

(B. N., Female, Turkish Teacher at Secondary School for 19 years): “ ..... As a veteran teacher, I do my best to create a supportive and collaborative class climate. I always conduct interactive teaching by listening to students and establish a relationship based on trust and respect for students, exhibiting positive attitudes.... I suggest the novice teachers to be tender, energetic and compassionate; they should use their tone of voice, face expression, gestures and mimics not in a threatening manner, they carefully choose words and build good communication with the students. They should use clear, concrete language and words appropriate to the level of students, eye communication and supportive reactions. They should care not to embarrass student.....”

Experienced teachers know that students are more involved in classes when they relate courses to interests and needs of their students and give them tasks that they can succeed. They give new assignments to their students who have finished early as they know that they have different abilities and learning speeds. Knowing how to interact with all the students throughout the course is the best way to understand how well they are doing. They start teaching by specifying the goals of the course. They check whether the homework is done correctly and repeat them when it is needed. They ask students direct questions to make sure they understand what they want.

An effective teacher sees and rewards appropriate behavior, praising the students by emphasizing not only for their success, but also the process they are in. As a result, students can take responsibility for their own tasks, engage in learning activities, thus increasing their academic success. Veteran teachers actively involve their students in the learning process.

Their students spend less time doing desk-work. When these teachers do employ desk-work, it turns to be more interesting. The experienced teachers are expected to tend to do their lessons in a businesslike, task-oriented style by maintaining a strong academic focus in their classrooms. They are effective in designing lessons that boost student achievement and mastery. They are supposed to match their teaching activities to their students' developmental level and then gradually lead them to higher levels of mastery. This involves recognizing and correcting deficiencies in students' skill levels. They provide their students with opportunities to seek extra help if they fall behind. They always tend to be approachable and observant of cues that individual students are not learning or are uninvolved. They frequently check their students' progress (Partin, 2009).

(T. I., Male, Social Science Teacher at Secondary School for 18 years): "...For tomorrow's healthy and strong individuals, education and training that we will give to children should be appropriate to their natural development. They should be laughing, playing, having fun and learning while having fun. There is no need for laughter; even knowing that it is we the teachers who put a tiny smile on their faces will make us feel great. Children who can smile, enjoy themselves with their friends and teachers, and have joyful surroundings, will have a more positive outlook when they fulfill their duties and responsibilities that life will bear in them.... the classroom climate is very important for them to be happy and get academic achievement.. I recommend that novice teachers should listen to their students, know their students' names by the end of the first weeks of school, try to see things from their students' point of view. In this way the students will feel that they are the important part of the group in classroom and develop self-confidence and self-reliance, as a result, they will hardly experience engagement problems in learning environment."

Classrooms are social spaces by their nature. Teachers and children play together, share stories about their experiences outside the classroom or after-school activities, and work together to create a learning environment. The classroom climate can be defined in positive and negative dimensions. A positive climate includes the degree to which students enjoy experiencing warm relationships with adults and their peers and enjoy the class as a whole. Adverse climates turn the learning environment into a place where the students feel humiliated or irritated in interaction with their teachers and peers.

For a teacher, smiling is the first and most important form to communicate positively with students in classrooms that are social environments and have warm and positive classroom climate. A teacher who entered classroom smiling would say to his students, "I am very happy to be here with you and I feel very comfortable." With a dull facial expression, a distant tone of voice and a dry and cold expression, it is not

possible for students to be attentive, to be eager to learn, and it is very hard to be a good guide to them. The students will remember what feelings the teachers have given them rather than what they have taught. For this reason, the teachers should share their smiles with their students in the classroom not in the teachers' room with their colleagues.

There is strong evidence concerning student-teacher relationships as an important aspect for children's academic achievement and development of some necessary skills (Pianta et al., 2003); there is a significant connection between teacher-student relationship and students' peer competencies (Howes et al., 1994; Birch & Ladd, 1998 ; Howes, 2000) as well as paths to academic success or failure (van Ijzendoorn et al, 1992; Pianta et al., 1995 ; Birch & Ladd, 1996, 1998 ; Ladd et al., 1999 ; Silver et al., 2005 ;).

(T. A., Male, Teacher of Social Sciences for 16 years): "...I use entertainment as an educational tool to keep it interesting and to create excitement for learning. By making learning activities more joyful and colorful, I try to make things even easier, which my students find challenging and have difficulty to learn. An amusing and lively classroom environment can create a positive climate and provide positive contributions to the class climate. It prevents the formation of stress, fear and tension that affect learning in negative way. It creates opportunities for students to relax in a positive environment with their existing energy.... Novice teachers should create a mediating environment and a harmonious class environment by using methods such as humor or drama so as to eliminate unwanted behaviors such as tension and hostility in the students. If they stimulate the student moderately for the negative behavior that they want to correct in the student, the student can feel that he is not threatened and humiliated, thus he can behave more sensitively about not repeating the wrong and negative behavior. Also some activities such as drama, sports, music should be provided for energetic but indifferent students..."

In an entertaining environment, associating preliminary information with new information will facilitate learning and remembering, thus contributing to academic success. By creating environments where students can express their feelings, thoughts, impressions and requests, opportunities will be created to make learning more permanent.

Amusing learning contributes to students' critical and creative thinking and problem solving skills to enrich their perspectives on life and events, enjoying colorful and versatile ways of life. Sincere and suitable joys can reduce the anxieties to learning and revive the classroom environment. If the subject matter is given with a joke or cartoons, the power of the subject will increase and it will always be remembered in the mind of the student. The games, sports activities and afterschool activities attract almost all the students who have engagement

problems in the learning activities. In some studies, this problem has been discussed and striking results have been found. Participation in sports, especially among males, shows more consistent effects than participation in other extracurricular activities or participation in extracurricular activities more generally (McNeal, 1995 ; Pittman, 1991 ; Yin & Moore, 2004 ) . In another study Waltson et al (2008) found out that 59% of eighth graders participated in sports, 40% in drama or music, and 32% in clubs. The figures show that sports, games, drama, music and other afterschool activities such as youth programs at clubs and youth organizations are of great importance for the students who have engagement problems in learning activities in school environment. Beyond the classroom environment, out-of-school activities create opportunities for students to become engaged behaviorally (Simpkins et al., 2006 ; Vandell, Pierce, & Dadisman, 2005 ) . Behavioral engagement in out-of-school activities is referred to the student's attendance and involvement in the activities (Morris & Kalil, 2006 ; Rose-Krasnor, 2009 ; Vandell et al., 2005). Secondary School students tend to begin to become involved in activities outside of school; participating in activities such as sports, and arts, and music lessons have been argued to promote psychosocial and academic outcomes for students (Dumais, 2006 ; Ripke et al., 2006 ) .

From the statements of the veteran teachers, we can argue that novice teachers should encourage their students to participate in drama and music activities and to attend to after-school programs, thus making the students develop positive behaviors to learning activities in school environment.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In a classroom environment, each student has his/her own learning style, level of anxiety, interest in learning, communication skill and self-efficacy. Likewise, each teacher has his/her own teaching style, teaching experience, teaching strategy, personal traits and communication skill. As the veteran teachers have more years of teaching experience and they are more aware of the students' learning capacity than novice teachers, their recommendations are of great importance for novice teachers.

The veteran teachers recommend that novice teachers should listen to their students, know their learning styles and personality traits, convince and encourage their students to be successful, give confidence to their students, use voice tone effectively, raise or lower their voice volume according to the importance of the topic, use body language effectively, pay close attention to the students' gestures and body movements. According to the veteran teachers, for the courses to be efficient, novice teachers should plan and prepare their courses in time and act programmatically, should be punctual to the courses,

use colorful chalks and board markers to attract their students to the lesson. Besides, the veteran teachers suggest that the novice teachers should be able to use technology such as smart-board, computers, social medias, video-players and electronic materials, they should psychologically motive their students, develop their self-reliance, self-regulation skills, creative thinking skills. They should be democratic and teach democratic values, social values and justice. In this way, the student engagement in learning activities will be promoted and the students will get academic achievements in school environment.

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